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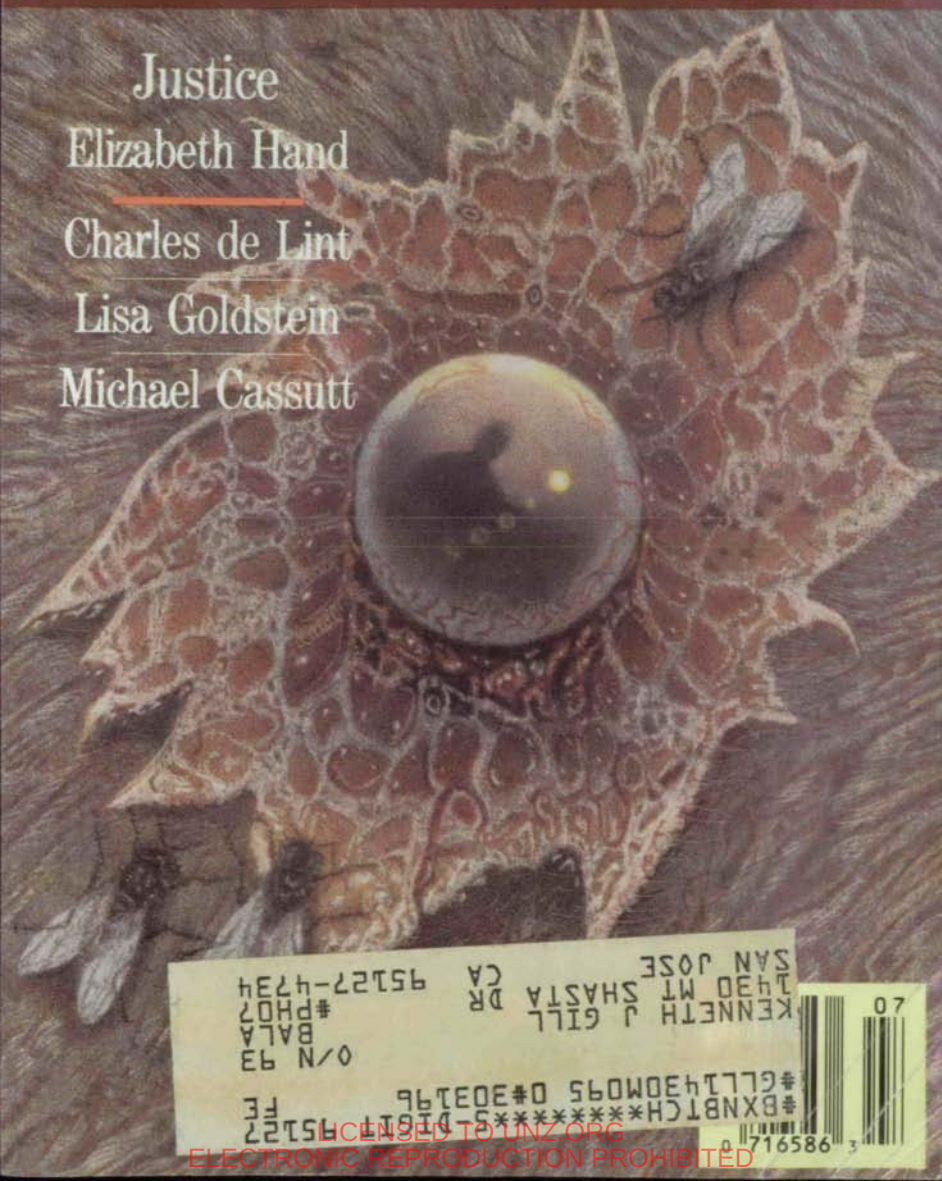

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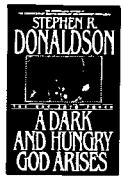

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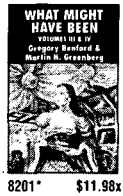

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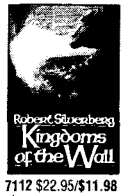

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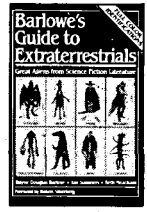

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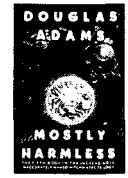

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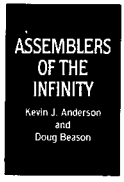

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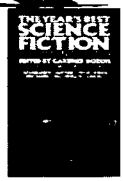

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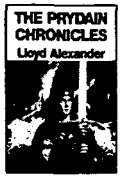

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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy&ScienceFiction

JULY • 44th Year of Publication

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

I CAN always tell when a new issue has hit the stands, because my mail increases. Readers write to tell me their reactions. Often the letters are about small things, such as the one I received today, complaining about a certain writer's stylistic conceits. Sometimes they are about larger issues, such as whether the magazine should publish violent stories at all. Usually, though, the letters revolve around a particular story.

Harry Turtledove's "Vermin" generated the most mail for the March issue. Readers either loved it or hated it. They had the same reaction to Jack Cady's "The Night We Buried Road Dog" in the January issue. Three stories in February caused readers to write: Kate Wilhelm's "Naming the Flowers" (most loved it — except for the gentleman who found it too maternal); D. William Shunn's "From Our Point of View We Had Moved to the Left" (some letters called it timely while others took exception to its view of our political process); and Mark Budz's "Toy Soldiers" (which some readers thought cold and others, particularly vets, found exceptionally moving).

I love to get these letters because they are tangible proof that readers think about and enjoy the magazine. When possible, I forward the letters to the writers so that they know what kind of effect their prose has had. Yet I doubt that F&SF, under my editorship, will publish a letter column.

There are two main reasons for this. The first is that a letter column takes away space best reserved for fiction. Our stories generate the response. I can never predict which story the readers will react to. I would prefer to publish one more story per issue because that story might be the most talked-about piece.

The second reason is a bit more complex, and has to do with the business of publishing. Let me use the March issue as an example. I

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have received fifteen letters about the issue as of today, February 24, 1993. If I had them typeset this weekend, they would appear in the July issue which gets sent to the printer at the end of March. Those letters would hit the stands in June. Any reader response to those letters wouldn't reach me until the end of June, and those new letters wouldn't be printed until the December issue. The lead time, as this lag is called, destroys the hope of good dialogue, and dialogue is what a letter column is all about.

People who are moved by a short story want to talk about it. They want to talk about it *now*. They write me a letter, or post a note on a computer bulletin board, or talk about the story with a friend. Computer bulletin boards and friends provide instant feedback. A letter in F&SF wouldn't receive a response until six months after the interesting story appeared. By then the letter writer might have found another story that fascinates even more, because it is recent.

So if you hunger for analysis about the stories you read in F&SF, pick up *Locus* or *The Comic Buyer's Guide*, both of which have short fiction review sections. If you want discussion, find the science fiction discussion groups on a computer bulletin board. (GEnie has a short fiction review section in the Science Fiction and Fantasy Roundtable. I'm sure other on-line services have similar discussion groups.) Better yet, do as one reader did, and buy copies of the magazine for your friends. The gesture might provide at least one night's worth of dinner conversation.

And please keep those cards and letters coming. Not because I'm going to print them, but because they remind me that you're out there, reading the issues and talking about the fiction. I choose these stories because I believe they're worth sharing. It's always nice to know when you agree.

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Since Charles de Lint's last appearance in F&SF ("Bridges, October/November, 1992), his novel, The Little Country, *was published in paperback. His novella,* The Wishing Well, *has just appeared from Axolotl Press.*

"Paperjack" is set in the fictional city of Newford, where many of Charles' stories are set. Strange things happen in Newford, from mythic creatures appearing around the holidays to Bigfoot lurking in city streets. This time, the enigma isn't a creature at all, but a down-on-his-luck man by the name of Paperjack.

PAPERJACK

By Charles de Lint

IF YOU THINK EDUCATION IS EXPENSIVE, TRY IGNORANCE.
— DEREK BOK

CHURCHES AREN'T HAVENS of spiritual enlightenment; they enclose the spirit. The way Jilly explains it, organizing Mystery tends to undermine its essence. I'm not so sure I agree, but then I don't really know enough about it. When it comes to things that can't be logically explained, I take a step back and leave them to Jilly or my brother Christy — they thrive on that kind of thing. If I had to describe myself as belonging to any church or mystical order, it'd be one devoted to secular humanism. My concerns are for real people and the here and now; the possible existence of God, faeries, or some metaphysical Otherworld just doesn't fit into my worldview.

Except...

You knew there'd be an "except," didn't you, or else why would I be writing this down?

It's not like I don't have anything to say. I'm all for creative expression,

"Paperjack" was first published in a limited edition by Cheap Street, 1991. *Copyright © 1991 by Charles de Lint. Reprinted by permission of the author.*

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but my medium's music. I'm not an artist like Jilly, or a writer like Christy. But the kinds of things that have been happening to me can't really be expressed in a fiddle tune — no, that's not entirely true. I can express them, but the medium is such I can't be assured that, when I'm playing, listeners hear what I mean them to hear.

That's how it works with instrumental music, and it's probably why the best of it is so enduring: the listener takes away whatever he or she wants from it. Say the composer was trying to tell us about the aftermath of some great battle. When we hear it,the music might speak to us of a parent we've lost, a friend's struggle with some debilitating disease, a doe standing at the edge of a forest at twilight, or any of a thousand other unrelated things.

Realistic art like Jilly does — or at least it's realistically rendered; her subject matter's right out of some urban update of those Andrew Lang color-coded fairy tale books that most of us read when we were kids — and the collections of urban legends and stories that my brother writes don't have that same leeway. What goes down on the canvas or on paper, no matter how skillfully drawn or written, doesn't allow for much in the way of an alternate interpretation.

So that's why I'm writing this down: to lay it all out in black and white where maybe I can understand it myself.

For the past week, every afternoon after busking up by the William Street Mall for the lunchtime crowds, I've packed up my fiddle case and headed across town to come here to St. Paul's Cathedral. Once I get here, I sit on the steps about halfway up, take out this notebook, and try to write. The trouble is, I haven't been able to figure out where to start.

I like it out here on the steps. I've played inside the cathedral — just once, for a friend's wedding. The wedding was okay, but I remember coming in on my own to test the acoustics an hour or so before the rehearsal; ever since then I've been a little unsure about how Jilly views this kind of place. My fiddling didn't feel enclosed. Instead the walls seemed to open the music right up; the cathedral gave the reel I was playing a stately grace — a spiritual grace — that it had never held for me before. I suppose it had more to do with the architect's design than the presence of God, still I could've played there all night only —

But I'm rambling again. I've filled a couple of pages now, which is more than I've done all week, except after just rereading what I've written so far, I don't know if any of it's relevant.

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Maybe I should just tell you about Paperjack. I don't know that it starts with him exactly, but it's probably as good a place as any to begin.

It was a glorious day, made all the more precious because the weather had been so weird that spring. One day I'd be bundled up in a jacket and scarf, cloth cap on my head, with fingerless gloves to keep the cold from my finger joints while I was out busking, the next I'd be in a T-shirt, breaking into a sweat just thinking about standing out on some street corner to play tunes.

There wasn't a cloud in the sky, the sun was halfway home from noon to the western horizon, and Jilly and I were just soaking up the rays on the steps of St. Paul's. I was slouched on the steps, leaning on one elbow, my fiddle case propped up beside me, wishing I had worn shorts because my jeans felt like leaden weights on my legs. Sitting beside me, perched like a cat about to pounce on something terribly interesting that only it could see, Jilly was her usual scruffy self. There were flecks of paint on her loose cotton pants and her short-sleeved blouse, more under her fingernails, and still more half-lost in the tangles of her hair. She turned to look at me, her face miraculously untouched by her morning's work, and gave me one of her patented smiles.

"Did you ever wonder where he's from?" Jilly asked.

That was one of her favorite phrases: "Did you ever wonder...?" It could take you from considering if and when fish slept, or why people look up when they're thinking, to more arcane questions about ghosts, little people living behind wallboards, and the like. And she loved guessing about people's origins. Sometimes when I was busking she'd tag along and sit by the wall at my back, sketching people who were listening to me play. Invariably, she'd come up behind me and whisper in my ear — usually when I was in the middle of a complicated tune that needed all my attention — something along the lines of, "The guy in the polyester suit? Ten to one he rides a big chopper on the weekends, complete with a jean vest."

So I was used to it.

Today she wasn't picking out some nameless stranger from a crowd. Instead her attention was on Paperjack, sitting on the steps far enough below us that he couldn't hear what we were saying.

Paperjack had the darkest skin I'd ever seen on a man — an amazing ebony that seemed to swallow light. He was in his mid-sixties, I'd guess, short corkscrew hair all gone gray. The dark suits he wore were threadbare and out

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of fashion, but always clean. Under his suit jacket he usually wore a white T-shirt that flashed so brightly in the sun it almost hurt your eyes — just like his teeth did when he gave you that lopsided grin of his.

Nobody knew his real name and he never talked. I don't know if he was mute, or if he just didn't have anything to say, but the only sounds I ever heard him make were a chuckle or a laugh. People started calling him Paperjack because he worked an origami gig on the streets.

He was a master at folding paper into shapes. He kept a bag of different colored paper by his knee; people would pick their color and then tell him what they wanted, and he'd make it — no cuts, just folding. And he could make anything. From simple flower and animal shapes to things so complex it didn't seem possible for him to capture their essence in a piece of folded paper. So far as I know, he'd never disappointed a single customer.

I'd seen some of the old men come down from Little Japan to sit and watch him work. They called him *sensei*, a term of respect they didn't exactly bandy around.

But origami was only the most visible side of his gig. He also told fortunes. He had one of those little folded paper Chinese fortune-telling devices that we all played around with when we were kids. You know the kind: you fold the corners in to the center, turn it over, then fold them in again. When you're done you can stick your index fingers and thumbs inside the little flaps of the folds and open it up so that it looks like a flower. You move your fingers back and forth, and it looks like the flower's talking to you.

Paperjack's fortune-teller was just like that. It had the names of four colors on the outside and eight different numbers inside. First you picked a color — say, red. The fortune-teller would seem to talk soundlessly as his fingers moved back and forth to spell the word, R-E-D, opening and closing until there'd be a choice from four of the numbers. Then you picked a number, and he counted it out until the fortune-teller was open with another or the same set of numbers revealed. Under the number you chose at that point was your fortune.

Paperjack didn't read it out — he just showed it to the person, then stowed the fortune-teller back into the inside pocket of his jacket from which he'd taken it earlier. I'd never had my fortune read by him, but Jilly'd had it done for her a whole bunch of times.

"The fortunes are always different," she told me once. "I sat behind him

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while he was doing one for a customer, and I read the fortune over her shoulder. When she'd paid him, I got mine done. I picked the same number she did, but when he opened it, there was a different fortune there."

"He's just got more than one of those paper fortune-tellers in his pocket," I said, but she shook her head.

"He never put it away," she said. "It was the same fortune-teller, the same number, but some time between the woman's reading and mine, it changed."

I knew there could be any number of logical explanations for how that could have happened, starting with plain sleight of hand, but I'd long ago given up continuing arguments with Jilly when it comes to that kind of thing.

Was Paperjack magic? Not in my book, at least not the way Jilly thought he was. But there was a magic about him, the magic that always hangs like an aura about someone who's as good an artist as Paperjack was. He also made me feel good. Around him, an overcast day didn't seem half so gloomy, and when the sun shone, it always seemed brighter. He just exuded a glad feeling that you couldn't help but pick up on. So in that sense, he was magic.

I'd also wondered where he'd come from, how he'd ended up on the street. Street people seemed pretty well evenly divided between those who had no choice but to be there, and those who chose to live there like I do. But even then there's a difference. I had a little apartment not far from Jilly's. I could get a job when I wanted one, usually in the winter when the busking was bad and club gigs were slow.

Not many street people have that choice, but I thought Paperjack might be one of them.

"He's such an interesting guy," Jilly was saying.

I nodded.

"But I'm worried about him," she went on.

"How so?"

Jilly's brow wrinkled with a frown. "He seems to be getting thinner, and he doesn't get around as easily as he once did. You weren't here when he showed up today—he walked as though gravity had suddenly doubled its pull on him."

"Well, he's an old guy, Jilly."

"That's exactly it. Where does he live? Does he have someone to look out for him?"

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That was Jilly for you. She had a heart as big as the city, with room in it for everyone and everything. She was forever taking in strays, be they dogs, cats, or people.

I'd been one of her strays once, but that was a long time ago.

"Maybe we should ask him," I said.

"He can't talk," she reminded me.

"Maybe he just doesn't *want* to talk."

Jilly shook her head. "I've tried a zillion times. He hears what I'm saying, and somehow he manages to answer with a smile or a raised eyebrow or whatever, but he doesn't talk." The wrinkles in her brow deepened until I wanted to reach over and smooth them out. "These days," she added, "he seems haunted to me."

If someone else had said that, I'd know that they meant Paperjack had something troubling him. With Jilly though, you often had to take that kind of statement literally.

"Are we talking ghosts now?" I asked.

I tried to keep the skepticism out of my voice, but from the flash of disappointment that touched Jilly's eyes, I knew I hadn't done a very good job.

"Oh, Geordie," she said. "Why can't you just *believe* what happened to us?"

Here's one version of what happened that night, some three years ago now, to which Jilly was referring:

We saw a ghost. He stepped out of the past on a rainy night and stole away the woman I loved. At least that's the way I remember it. Except for Jilly, no one else does.

Her name was Samantha Rey. She worked at Gypsy Records and had an apartment on Stanton Street, except after that night, when the past came up to steal her away, no one at Gypsy Records remembered her any more, and the landlady of her Stanton Street apartment had never heard of her. The ghost hadn't just stolen her, he'd stolen all memory of her existence.

All I had left of her was an old photograph that Jilly and I found in Moore's Antiques a little while later. It had a photographer's date on the back: 1912. It was Sam in the picture, Sam with a group of strangers standing on a front porch of some old house.

I remembered her, but she'd never existed. That's what I had to believe, because nothing else made sense. I had all these feelings and memories of her,

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but they had to be what my brother called *jamais vu*. That's like *déjà vu*, except instead of having felt you'd been somewhere before, you remembered something that had never happened. I'd never heard the expression before — he got it from a David Morrell thriller that he'd been reading — but it had an authentic ring about it.

Jamais vu.

But Jilly remembered Sam, too.

Thinking about Sam always brought a tightness to my chest; it made my head hurt trying to figure it out. I felt as if I were betraying Sam by trying to convince myself she'd never existed, but I had to convince myself of that, because believing that it really *had* happened was even scarier. How do you live in a world where anything can happen?

"You'll get used to it," Jilly told me. "There's a whole invisible world out there, lying side by side with our own. Once you get a peek into it, the window doesn't close. You're always going to be *aware* of it."

"I don't want to be," I said.

She just shook her head. "You don't really get a lot of choice in this kind of thing," she said.

You always have a choice — that's what I believe. And I chose to not get caught up in some invisible world of ghosts and spirits and who knew what. But I still dreamed of Sam, as if she'd been real. I still kept her photo in my fiddle case.

I could feel its presence right now, glimmering through the leather, whispering to me.

Remember me...

I couldn't forget. *Jamais vu.* But I wanted to.

Jilly scooted a little closer to me on the step and laid a hand on my knee.

"Denying it just makes things worse," she said, continuing an old ongoing argument that I don't think we'll ever resolve. "Until you accept that it really happened, the memory's always going to haunt you, undermining everything that makes you who you are."

"Haunted like Paperjack?" I asked, trying to turn the subject back onto more comfortable ground, or at least focus the attention onto someone other than myself. "Is that what you think's happened to him?"

Jilly sighed. "Memories can be just like ghosts," she said.

Didn't I know it.

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I looked down the steps to where Paperjack had been sitting, but he was gone, and now a couple of pigeons were waddling across the steps. The wind blew a candy bar wrapper up against a riser. I laid my hand on Jilly's and gave it a squeeze, then picked up my fiddle case and stood up.

"I've got to go," I told her.

"I didn't mean to upset you..."

"I know. I've just got to walk for a bit and think."

She didn't offer to accompany me and for that I was glad. Jilly was my best friend, but right then I had to be alone.

I WENT RAMBLING; just let my feet just take me wherever they felt like going, south from St. Paul's and down Battersfield Road, all the way to the Pier, my fiddle case banging against my thigh as I walked. When I got to the waterfront, I leaned up against the fieldstone wall where the Pier met the beach. I stood and watched the fishermen work their lines farther out over the lake. Fat gulls wheeled above, crying like they hadn't been fed in months. Down on the sand, a couple was having an animated discussion, but they were too far away for me to make out what they were arguing about. They looked like figures in some old silent movie; caricatures, their movements larger than life, rather than real people.

I don't know what I was thinking about; I was trying *not* to think, I suppose, but I wasn't having much luck. The arguing couple depressed me.

Hang onto what you've got, I wanted to tell them, but it wasn't any of my business. I thought about heading across town to Fitzhenry Park — there was a part of it called the Silenus Gardens filled with stone benches and statuary where I always felt better— when I spied a familiar figure sitting down by the river west of the Pier: Paperjack.

The Kickaha River was named after that branch of the Algonquin language family that originally lived in this area before the white men came and took it all away from them. All the tribe had left now was a reservation north of the city and this river named after them. The Kickaha had its source north of the reserve and cut through the city on its way to the lake. In this part of town it separated the business section and commercial waterfront from the Beaches where the money lives.

There are houses in the Beaches that make the old stately homes in

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Lower Crowsea look like tenements, but you can't see them from here. Looking west, all you see is green — first the City Commission's manicured lawns on either side of the river, then the treed hills that hide the homes of the wealthy from the rest of us plebes. On the waterfront itself are a couple of country clubs and the private beaches of the *really* wealthy whose estates back right onto the water.

Paperjack was sitting on this side of the river, doing I don't know what. From where I stood, I couldn't tell. He seemed to be just sitting there on the riverbank, watching the slow water move past. I watched him for a while, then hoisted my fiddle case from where I'd leaned it against the wall and hopped down to the sand. When I got to where he was sitting, he looked up and gave me an easy, welcoming grin, as if he'd been expecting me to show up.

Running into him like this was fate, Jilly would say. I'll stick to calling it coincidence. It's a big city, but it isn't that big.

Paperjack made a motion with his hand, indicating I should pull up a bit of lawn beside him. I hesitated for a moment — right up until then, I realized later, everything could have worked out differently. But I made the choice and sat beside him.

There was a low wall, right down by the water, with rushes and lilies growing up against it. Among the lilies was a family of ducks — mother and a paddling of ducklings — and that was what Paperjack had been watching. He had an empty plastic bag in his hand, and the breadcrumbs that remained in the bottom told me he'd been feeding the ducks until his bread ran out.

He made another motion with his hand, touching the bag, then pointing to the ducks.

I shook my head. "I wasn't planning on coming down," I said, "so I didn't bring anything to feed them."

He nodded, understanding.

We sat quietly awhile longer. The ducks finally gave up on us and paddled farther up the river, looking for better pickings. Once they were gone, Paperjack turned to me again. He laid his hand against his heart, then raised his eyebrows questioningly.

Looking at that slim black hand with its long narrow fingers lying against his dark suit, I marveled again at the sheer depth of his ebony coloring. Even with the bit of a tan I'd picked up busking the last few weeks, I felt absolutely

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pallid beside him. Then I lifted my gaze to his eyes. If his skin swallowed light, I knew where it went: into his eyes. They were dark, so dark you could barely tell the difference between pupil and cornea, but inside their darkness was a kind of glow — a shine that resonated inside me like the deep hum that comes from my fiddle's bass strings whenever I play one of those wild Shetland reels in A minor.

I suppose it's odd, describing something visual in terms of sound, but right then, right at that moment, I *heard* the shine of his eyes, singing inside me. And I understood immediately what he'd meant by his gesture.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm feeling a little low."

He touched his chest again, but it was a different, lighter gesture this time. I knew what that meant as well.

"There's not much anybody can do about it," I said.

Except Sam. She could come back. Or maybe if I just knew she'd been *real*... But that opened a whole other line of thinking that I wasn't sure I wanted to get into again. I wanted her to have been real, I wanted her to come back, but if I accepted that, I also had to accept that ghosts were real and that the past could sneak up and steal someone from the present, taking them back into a time that had already been and gone.

Paperjack took his fortune-telling device out of the breast pocket of his jacket and gave me a questioning look. I started to shake my head, but before I could think about what I was doing, I just said, "What the hell," and let him do his stuff.

I chose blue from the colors, because that was the closest to how I was feeling; he didn't have any colors like confused or lost or foolish. I watched his fingers move the paper to spell out the color, then chose four from the numbers, because that's how many strings my fiddle has. When his fingers stopped moving the second time, I picked seven for no particular reason at all.

He folded back the paper flap so I could read my fortune. All it said was: "Swallow the past."

I didn't get it. I thought it'd say something like that Bobby McFerrin song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy." What it did say didn't make any sense at all.

"I don't understand," I told Paperjack. "What's it supposed to mean?"

He just shrugged. Folding up the fortune-teller, he put it back in his pocket.

Swallow the past. Did that mean I was supposed to forget about it?

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Or...well, swallow could also mean believe or accept. Was that what he was trying to tell me? Was he echoing Jilly's argument?

I thought about that photo in my fiddle case, and then an idea came to me. I don't know why I'd never thought of it before. I grabbed my fiddle case and stood up.

"I..." I wanted to thank him, but somehow the words just escaped me. All that came out was, "I've gotta run."

But I could tell he understood my gratitude. I wasn't exactly sure what he'd done, except that that little message on his fortune-teller had put together a connection for me that I'd never seen before.

Fate, I could hear Jilly saying.

Paperjack smiled and waved me off.

I followed coincidence away from Paperjack and the riverbank and back up Battersfield Road to the Newford Public Library in Lower Crowsea.

Time does more than erode a riverbank or wear mountains down into tired hills. It takes the edge from our memories as well, overlaying everything with a soft focus so that it all blurs together. What really happened gets all jumbled up with the hopes and dreams we once had and what we wish had really happened. Did you ever run into someone you went to school with — someone you never really hung around with, but just passed in the halls, or had a class with — and they act like you were the best of buddies, because that's how they remember it? For that matter, maybe you *were* buddies, and it's you that's remembering it wrong...

Starting some solid detective work on what happened to Sam took the blur from my memories and brought her back into focus for me. The concepts of ghosts or people disappearing into the past just got pushed to one side, and all I thought about was Sam and tracking her down; if not the Sam I had known, then the woman she'd become in the past.

My friend Amy Scallan works at the library. She's a tall, angular woman with russet hair and long fingers that would have stood her in good stead at a piano keyboard. Instead she took up the Uillean pipes, and we play together in an on-again-off-again band called Johnny Jump Up. Matt Casey, our third member, is the reason we're not that regular a band.

Matt's a brilliant bouzouki and guitar player and a fabulous singer, but he's not got much in the way of social skills, and he's way too cynical for my

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liking. Since he and I don't really get along well, it makes rehearsals kind of tense at times. On the other hand, I love playing with Amy. She's the kind of musician who has such a good time playing that you can't help but enjoy yourself as well. Whenever I think of Amy, the first image that always comes to mind is of her rangy frame folded around her pipes, right elbow moving back and forth on the bellows to fill the bag under her left arm, those long fingers just dancing on the chanter, foot tapping, head bobbing, a grin on her face.

She always makes sure that the gig goes well, and we have a lot of fun, so it balances out I guess.

I showed her the picture I had of Sam. There was a street number on the porch's support pillar to the right of the steps and enough of the house in the picture that I'd be able to match it up to the real thing. If I could find out what street it was on. If the house still existed.

"This could take forever," Amy said as she laid the photo down on the desk.

"I've got the time."

Amy laughed. "I suppose you do. I don't know how you do it, Geordie. Everyone else in the world has to bust their buns to make a living, but you just cruise on through."

"The trick's having a low overhead," I said.

Amy just rolled her eyes. She'd been to my apartment, and there wasn't much to see: a spare fiddle hanging on the wall with a couple of Jilly's paintings; some tune books with tattered covers and some changes of clothing; one of those old-fashioned record players that had the turntable and speakers all in one unit and a few albums leaning against the side of the apple crate it sat on; a couple of bows that desperately needed rehairing; the handful of used paperbacks I'd picked up for the week's reading from Duffy's Used Books over on Walker Street; and a little beat up old cassette machine with a handful of tapes.

And that was it. I got by.

I waited at the desk while Amy got the books we needed. She came back with an armload. Most had Newford in the title, but a few also covered that period of time when the city was still called Yoors, after the Dutchman Diederick van Yoors, who first settled the area in the early 1800s. It got changed to Newford back around the turn of the century, so all that's left now

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to remind the city of its original founding father is a street name.

Setting the books down before me on the desk, Amy went off into the stacks to look for some more obscure titles. I didn't wait for her to get back, but went ahead and started flipping through the first book on the pile, looking carefully at the pictures.

I started off having a good time. There's a certain magic in old photos, especially when they're of the place where you grew up. They cast a spell over you. Dirt roads where now there was pavement, sided by office complexes. The old Brewster Theatre in its heyday — I remembered it as the place where I first saw Phil Ochs and Bob Dylan, and later all night movie festivals, but the Williamson Street Mall stood there now. Boating parties on the river. Old City Hall — it was a youth hostel these days.

But my enthusiasm waned with the afternoon. By the time the library closed, I was no closer to getting a street name for the house in Sam's photo than I had been when I came in. Amy gave me a sympathetic "I told you so" look when we separated on the front steps of the library. I just told her I'd see her tomorrow.

I had something to eat at Kathryn's Café. I'd gone there hoping to see Jilly, only I'd forgotten it was her night off. I tried calling her when I'd finished eating, but she was out. So I took my fiddle over to the theater district and worked the crowds waiting in line there for an hour or so before I headed off for home, my pockets heavy with change.

That night, just before I fell asleep, I felt like a hole sort of opened in the air above my bed. Lying there, I found myself touring Newford — just floating through its streets. Though the time was the present, there was no color. Everything appeared in the same sepia tones as in my photo of Sam.

I don't remember when I finally did fall asleep.

THE NEXT morning I was at the library right when it opened, carrying two cups of take-out coffee in a paper bag, one of which I offered to Amy when I got to her desk. Amy muttered something like, "When owls prowl the day, they shouldn't look so bloody cheerful about it," but she accepted the coffee and cleared a corner of her desk so that I could get back to the books.

In the photo I had of Sam there was just the edge of a bay window visible beside the porch, with fairly unique rounded gingerbread trim running off

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from either side of its keystone. I'd thought it would be the clue to tracking down the place. It looked almost familiar, but I was no longer sure if that was because I'd actually seen the house at some time, or it was just from looking at the photo so much.

Unfortunately, those details weren't helping at all.

"You know, there's no guarantee you're going to find a picture of the house you're looking for in those books," Amy said around mid-morning when she was taking her coffee break. "They didn't exactly go around taking pictures of everything."

I was at the last page of *Walks Through Old Crowsea.* Closing the book, I set it on the finished pile beside my chair and then leaned back, lacing my fingers behind my head. My shoulders were stiff from sitting hunched over a desk all morning.

"I know. I'm going to give Jack a call when I'm done here to see if I can borrow his bike this afternoon."

"You're going to pedal all around town looking for this house?"

"What else can I do?"

"There's always the archives at the main library."

I nodded, feeling depressed. It had seemed like such a good idea yesterday. It was still a good idea. I just hadn't realized how long it would take.

"Or you could go someplace like the Market and show the photo around to some of the older folks. Maybe one of them will remember the place."

"I suppose."

I picked up the next book, *The Architectural Heritage of Old Yoors,* and went back to work.

And there it was, on page thirty-eight. The house. There were three buildings in a row in the photo; the one I'd been looking for was the middle one. I checked the caption: "Grasso Street, circa 1920."

"I don't believe it," Amy said. I must have made some kind of a noise, because she was looking up at me from her own work. "You found it, didn't you?" she added.

"I think so. Have you got a magnifying glass?"

She passed it over,and I checked out the street number of the middle house. One-forty-two. The same as in my photo.

Amy took over then. She phoned a friend who worked in the land registry

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office. He called back a half hour later and gave us the name of the owner in 1912, when my photo had been taken: Edward Dickenson. The house had changed hands a number of times since the Dickensons had sold it in the forties.

We checked the phone book, but there were over a hundred Dickensons listed, twelve with just an initial "E" and one Ed. None of the addresses were on Grasso Street.

"That doesn't mean anything," Amy said. "It's been almost eighty years."

I wanted to run by that block on Grasso where the house was — I'd passed it I don't know how many times, and never paid much attention to it or any of its neighbors — but I needed more background on the Dickensons first. Amy showed me how to run the microfiche, and soon I was going through back issues of *The Newford Star* and *The Daily Journal*, concentrating on the local news sections and the gossip columns.

The first photo of Edward Dickenson that came up was in *The Daily Journal*, the June 21st, 1913 issue. He was standing with the Dean of Butler University at some opening ceremony. I compared him to the people with Sam in my photo and found him standing behind her to her left.

Now that I was on the right track, I began to work in a kind of frenzy. I whipped through the microfiche, making notes of every mention of the Dickensons. Edward turned out to have been a stockbroker, one of the few who didn't lose his shirt in subsequent market crashes. Back then the money lived in Lower Crowsea, mostly on McKennit, Grasso, and Stanton Streets. Edward made the papers about once a month — business deals, society galas, fund-raising events, political dinners, and the like. It wasn't until I hit the October 29, 1915 issue of *The Newford Star* that I had the wind knocked out of my sails.

It was the picture that got to me: Sam and a man who was no stranger. I'd seen him before. He was the ghost that had stepped out of the past and stolen her away. Under the photo was a caption announcing the engagement of Thomas Edward Dickenson, son of the well-known local businessman, to Samantha Rey.

In the picture of Sam that I had, Dickenson wasn't there with the rest of the people — he'd probably taken it. But here he was. Real. With Sam. I couldn't ignore it.

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Back then they didn't have the technology to make a photograph lie.

There was a weird buzzing in my ears as that picture burned its imprint onto my retinas. It was hard to breathe, and my T-shirt suddenly seemed too tight.

I don't know what I'd been expecting, but I knew it wasn't this. I suppose I thought I'd track down the people in the picture and find out that the woman who looked like Sam was actually named Gertrude something-or-other, and she'd lived her whole life with that family. I didn't expect to find Sam. I didn't expect the ghost to have been real.

I was in a daze as I put away the microfiche and shut down the machine.

"Geordie?" Amy asked as I walked by her desk. "Are you okay?"

I remember nodding and muttering something about needing a break. I picked up my fiddle and headed for the front door. The next thing I remember is standing in front of the address on Grasso Street and looking at the Dickensons' house.

I had no idea who owned it now; I hadn't been paying much attention to Amy after she told me that the Dickensons had sold it. Someone had renovated it fairly recently, so it didn't look at all the same as in the photos, but under its trendy additions, I could see the lines of the old house.

I sat down on the curb with my fiddle case across my knees and just started at the building. The buzzing was back in my head. My shirt still felt too tight.

I didn't know what to do anymore, so I just sat there, trying to make sense out of what couldn't be reasoned away. I no longer had any doubt that Sam had been real, or that a ghost had stolen her away. The feeling of loss came back all over again, as if it had happened just now, not three years ago. And what scared me was, if she and the ghost were real, then what else might be?

I closed my eyes, and headlines of supermarket tabloids flashed across my eyes, a strobing flicker of bizarre images and words. That was the world Jilly lived in — one in which anything was possible. I didn't know if I could handle living in that kind of world. I needed rules and boundaries. Patterns.

It was a long time before I got up and headed for Kathryn's Café.

The first thing Jilly asked when I got in the door was, "Have you seen Paperjack?"

It took me a few moments to push back the clamor of my own thoughts

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to register what she'd asked. Finally I just shook my head.

"He wasn't at St. Paul's today," Jilly went on, "and he's always there, rain or shine, winter or summer." I didn't think he was looking well yesterday, and now..."

I tuned her out and took a seat at an empty table before I could fall down. That feeling of dislocation that had started up in me when I first saw Sam's photo in the microfiche kept coming and going in waves. It was cresting right now, and I found it hard to just sit in the chair, let alone listen to what Jilly was saying. I tuned her back in when the spaciness finally started to recede.

"...heart attack, who would he call? He can't *speak.*"

"I saw him yesterday," I said, surprised that my voice sounded so calm. "Around mid-afternoon. He seemed fine."

"He did?"

I nodded. "He was down by the pier, sitting on the riverbank, feeding the ducks. He read my fortune."

"He *did?*"

"You're beginning to sound like a broken record, Jilly."

For some reason, I was starting to feel better. That sense of being on the verge of a panic attack faded and then disappeared completely. Jilly pulled up a chair and leaned across the table, elbows propped up, chin cupped in her hands.

"So tell me," she said. "What made you do it? What was your fortune?"

I told her everything that had happened since I had seen Paperjack. That sense of dislocation came and went again a few times while I talked, but mostly I was holding firm.

"Holy shit!" Jilly said when I was done.

She put her hand to her mouth and looked quickly around, but none of the customers seemed to have noticed. She reached a hand across the table and caught one of mine.

"So now do you believe?" she asked.

"I don't have a whole lot of choice, do I?"

"What are you going to do?"

I shrugged. "What's to do? I found out what I needed to know — now I've got to learn to live with it and all the other baggage that comes with it."

Jilly didn't say anything for a long moment. She just held my hand and exuded comfort as only Jilly can.

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"You could find her," she said finally.

"Who? Sam?"

"Who else?"

"She's probably — " I stumbled over the word dead and settled for " — not even alive anymore."

"Maybe not," Jilly said. "She'd definitely be old. But don't you think you should find out?"

"I..."

I wasn't sure I wanted to know. And if she were alive, I wasn't sure I wanted to meet her. What could we say to each other?

"Think about it, anyway," Jilly said.

That was Jilly; she never took no for an answer.

"I'm off at eight," she said. "Do you want to meet me then?"

"What's up?" I asked, halfheartedly.

"I thought maybe you'd help me find Paperjack."

I might as well, I thought. I was becoming a bit of an expert in tracking people down by this point. Maybe I should get a card printed: Geordie Riddell, Private Investigations and Fiddle Tunes.

"Sure," I told her.

"Great," Jilly said.

She bounced up from her seat as a couple of new customers came into the café. I ordered a coffee from her after she'd gotten them seated, then stared out the window at the traffic going by on Battersfield. I tried not to think of Sam — trapped in the past, making a new life for herself there — but I might as well have tried to jump to the moon.

By the time Jilly came off shift I was feeling almost myself again, but instead of being relieved, I had this great load of guilt hanging over me. It all centered around Sam and the ghost. I'd denied her once. Now I felt as though I was betraying her all over again. Knowing what I knew — the photo accompanying the engagement notice in that old issue of *The Newford Star* flashed across my mind — the way I was feeling at the moment didn't seem right. I felt too normal; and so the guilt.

"I don't get it," I said to Jilly as we walked down Battersfield toward the Pier. "This afternoon I was falling to pieces, but now I just feel..."

"Calm?"

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"Yeah."

"That's because you've finally stopped fighting yourself and accepted that what you saw — what you remember — really happened. It was denial that was screwing you up."

She didn't add, "I told you so," but she didn't have to. It echoed in my head anyway, joining the rest of the guilt I was carrying around with me. If I'd only listened to her with an open mind, then...what?

I wouldn't be going through this all over again?

We crossed Lakeside Drive and made our way through the closed concession and souvenir stands to the beach. When we reached the Pier, I led her westward to where I'd last seen Paperjack,but he wasn't sitting by the river anymore. A lone duck regarded us hopefully, but neither of us had thought to bring any bread.

"So I track down Sam," I said, still more caught up in my personal quest than in looking for Paperjack. "If she's not dead, she'll be an old lady. If I find her — then what?"

"You'll complete the circle," Jilly said. She looked away from the river and faced me, her pixy features serious. "It's like the Kickaha say: everything is on a wheel. You stepped off the one that represents your relationship with Sam before it came full circle. Until you complete your turn on it, you'll never have peace of mind."

"When do you know you've come full circle?" I asked.

"You'll know."

She turned away before I could go on and started back toward the Pier. By day the place was crowded and full of noise, alive with tourists and people out relaxing, just looking to have a good time; by night, its occupancy was turned over to gangs of kids, fooling around on skateboards or simply hanging out, and the homeless: winos, bag ladies, hobos, and the like.

Jilly worked the crowd, asking after Paperjack, while I followed in her wake. Everybody knew him, or had seen him in the past week, but no one knew where he was now, or where he lived. We were about to give up and head over to Fitzhenry Park to start over again with the people hanging out there, when we heard the sound of a harmonica. It was playing the blues, a soft, mournful sound that drifted up from the beach.

We made for the nearest stairs and then walked back across the sand to find the Bossman sitting under the boardwalk, hands cupped around his

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instrument, head bowed down, eyes closed. There was no one listening to him except us. The people with money to throw in his old cloth cap were having dinner now in the fancy restaurants across Lakeside Drive or over in the theater district. He was just playing for himself.

When he was busking, he stuck to popular pieces — whatever was playing on the radio mixed with old show tunes, jazz favorites, and that kind of thing. The music that came from his harmonica now was pure magic. It transformed him, making him larger than life. The blues he played held all the world's sorrows in its long sliding notes and didn't so much change it, as make it bearable.

My fingers itched to pull out my fiddle and join him, but we hadn't come to jam. So we waited until he was done. The last note hung in the air for far longer than seemed possible, then he brought his hands away from his mouth and cradled the harmonica on his lap. He looked up at us from under drooping eyelids, the magic disappearing now that he'd stopped playing. He was just an old, homeless black man now, with the faint trace of a smile touching his lips.

"Hey, Jill — Geordie," he said. "What's doin'?"

"We're looking for Paperjack," Jilly told him.

The Bossman nodded. "Jack's the man for paperwork, all right."

"I've been worried about him," Jilly said. "About his health."

"You a doctor now, Jill?"

She shook her head.

"Anybody got a smoke?"

This time we both shook our heads.

From his pocket he pulled a half-smoked butt that he must have picked up off the boardwalk earlier, then lit it with a wooden match that he struck on the zipper of his jeans. He took a long drag and let it out so that the blue-gray smoke wreathed his head, studying us all the while.

"You care too much, you just get hurt," he said finally.

Jilly nodded. "I know. But I can't help it. Do you know where we can find him?"

"Well now. Come winter, he lives with a Mex family down in the Barrio."

"And in the summer?"

The Bossman shrugged. "I heard once he's got himself a camp up behind

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the Beaches."

"Thanks," Jilly said.

"He might not take to uninvited guests," the Bossman added. "Body gets himself an out-of-the-way squat like that, I'd think he be lookin' for privacy."

"I don't want to intrude," Jilly assured him. "I just want to make sure he's okay."

The Bossman nodded. "You're a stand-up kind of lady, Jill. I'll trust you to do what's right. I've been thinkin' old Jack's lookin' a little peak-ed myself. It's somethin' in his eyes — like just makin' do is gettin' to be a chore. But you take care, goin' back up in there. Some of the 'bos, they're not real accommodatin' to havin' strangers on their turf."

"We'll be careful," Jilly said.

The Bossman gave us both another long,thoughtful look, then lifted his harmonica and started to play again. Its mournful sound followed us back up to the boardwalk and seemed to trail us all the way to Lakeside Drive where we walked across the bridge to get to the other side of the Kickaha.

I don't know what Jilly was thinking about, but I was going over what she'd told me earlier. I kept thinking about wheels and how they turned.

ONCE PAST the City Commission's lawns on the far side of the river, the land starts to climb. It's just a lot of rough scrub on this side of the hills that make up the Beaches and every summer some of the hobos and other homeless people camp out in it. The cops roust them from time to time, but mostly they're left alone, and they keep to themselves.

Going in there I was more nervous than Jilly; I don't think she's scared of anything. The sun had gone down behind the hills and while it was twilight in the city, here it was already dark. I know a lot of the street people and get along with them better than most — everyone likes a good fiddle tune — but some of them could look pretty rough, and I kept anticipating that we'd run into some big wild-eyed hillbilly who'd take exception to our being there.

Well, we did run into one, but — like ninety percent of the street people in Newford — he was somebody that Jilly knew. He seemed pleased, if a little surprised to find her here, grinning at us in the fading light. He was a tall, big-shouldered man, dressed in dirty jeans and a flannel shirt, with big hobnailed boots on his feet and a shock of red hair that fell to his neck and stood up on

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top of his head in matted tangles. His name, appropriately enough, was Red. The smell that emanated from him made me want to shift position until I was standing upwind.

He not only knew where Paperjack's camp was, but took us there, only Paperjack wasn't home.

The place had Paperjack stamped all over it. There was a neatly rolled bedroll pushed up against a knapsack which probably held his changes of clothing. We didn't check it out, because we weren't there to go through his stuff. Behind the pack was a food cooler with a Coleman stove sitting on top of it, and everywhere you could see small origami stars that hung from the tree branches. There must have been over a hundred of them. I felt as if I were standing in the middle of space with stars all around me.

Jilly left a note for Paperjack, then we followed Red back out to Lakeside Drive. He didn't wait for our thanks. He just drifted away as soon as we reached the mown lawns that bordered the bush.

We split up then. Jilly had work to do — some art for Newford's entertainment weekly, *In the City* — and I didn't feel like tagging along to watch her work at her studio. She took the subway, but I decided to walk. I was bone-tired by then, but the night was one of those perfect ones when the city seems to be smiling. You can't see the dirt or the grime for the sparkle over everything. After all I'd been through today, I didn't want to be cooped up inside anywhere. I just wanted to enjoy the night.

I remember thinking about how Sam would've loved to be out walking with me on a night like this — the old Sam I'd lost, not necessarily the one she'd become. I didn't know that Sam at all, and I still wasn't sure I wanted to, even if I could track her down.

When I reached St. Paul's, I paused by the steps. Even though it was a perfect night to be out walking, something drew me inside. I tried the door, and it opened soundlessly at my touch. I paused just inside the door, one hand resting on the back pew, when I heard a cough.

I froze, ready to take flight. I wasn't sure how churches worked. Maybe my creeping around here at this time of night was...I don't know, sacrilegious or something.

I looked up to the front and saw that someone was sitting in the foremost pew. The cough was repeated, and I started down the aisle.

Intuitively, I guess I knew I'd find him here. Why else had I come inside?

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Paperjack nodded to me as I sat down beside him on the pew. I laid my fiddle case by my feet and leaned back. I wanted to ask after his health, to tell him how worried Jilly was about him, but my day caught up with me in a rush. Before I knew it, I was nodding off.

I knew I was dreaming when I heard the voice. I had to be dreaming, because there was only Paperjack and me sitting on the pew, and Paperjack was mute. But the voice had the sound that I'd always imagined Paperjack's would have if he could speak. It was like the movement of his fingers when he was folding origami — quick, but measured and certain. Resonant, like his finished paper sculptures that always seemed to have more substance to them than just their folds and shapes.

"No one in this world views it the same," the voice said. "I believe that is what amazes me the most about it. Each person has his or her own vision of the world, and whatever lies outside that worldview becomes invisible. The rich ignore the poor. The happy can't see those who are hurting."

"Paperjack...?" I asked.

There was only silence in reply.

"I...I thought you couldn't talk."

"So a man who has nothing he wishes to articulate is considered mute," the voice went on as though I hadn't interrupted. "It makes me weary."

"Who...who are you?" I asked.

"A mirror into which no one will look. A fortune that remains forever unread. My time here is done."

The voice fell silent again.

"Paperjack?"

Still silence.

It was just a dream, I told myself. I tried to wake myself from it. I told myself that the pew was made of hard, unyielding wood, and far too uncomfortable to sleep on. And Paperjack needed help. I remembered the cough and Jilly's worries.

But I couldn't wake up.

"The giving itself is the gift," the voice said suddenly. It sounded as though it came from the back of the church, or even farther away. "The longer I remain here, the more I forget."

Then the voice went away for good. I lost it in a dreamless sleep.

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I woke early, and all my muscles were stiff. My watch said it was ten to six. I had a moment's disorientation — where the hell *was* I? — and then I remembered. Paperjack. And the dream.

I sat up straighter in the pew, and something fell from my lap to the floor. A piece of folded paper. I bent stiffly to retrieve it, turning it over and over in my hands, holding it up to the dim gray light that was creeping in through the windows. It was one of Paperjack's Chinese fortune-tellers.

After awhile I fit my fingers into the folds of the paper and looked down at the colors. I chose blue, same as I had the last time, and spelled it out, my fingers moving the paper back and forth so that it looked like a flower speaking soundlessly to me. I picked numbers at random, then unfolded the flap to read what it had to say.

"The question is more important than the answer," it said.

I frowned, puzzling over it, then looked at what I would have gotten if I'd picked another number, but all the other folds were blank when I turned them over. I stared at it, then folded the whole thing back up and stuck it in my pocket. I was starting to get a serious case of the creeps.

Picking up my fiddle case, I left St. Paul's and wandered over to Chinatown. I had breakfast in an all-night diner, sharing the place with a bunch of blue-collar workers who were all talking about some baseball game they'd watched the night before. I thought of calling Jilly, but knew that if she'd been working all night on that *In the City* assignment, she'd be crashed out now and wouldn't appreciate a phone call.

I dawdled over breakfast, then slowly made my way up to that part of Foxville that's called the Rosses. That's where the Irish immigrants all lived in the forties and fifties. The place started changing in the sixties when a lot of hippies who couldn't afford the rents in Crowsea moved in, and it changed again with a new wave of immigrants from Vietnam and the Caribbean in the following decades. But the area, for all its changes, was still called the Rosses. My apartment was in the heart of it, right where Kelly Street meets Lee and crosses the Kickaha River. It's two doors down from The Harp, the only real Irish pub in town, which makes it convenient for me to get to the Irish music sessions on Sunday afternoons.

My phone was ringing when I got home. I was half-expecting it to be Jilly, even though it was only going on eight, but found myself talking to a reporter from *The Daily Journal* instead. His name was Ian Begley, and it turned out

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he was a friend of Jilly's. She'd asked him to run down what information he could on the Dickensons in the paper's morgue.

"Old man Dickenson was the last real businessman of the family," Begley told me. "Their fortunes started to decline when his son Tom took over — he's the one who married the woman that Jilly said you were interested in tracking down. He died in 1976. I don't have an obit on his widow, but that doesn't necessarily mean she's still alive. If she moved out of town, the paper wouldn't have an obit for her unless the family put one in."

He told me a lot of other stuff, but I was only half listening. The business with Paperjack last night and the fortune-telling device this morning were still eating away at me. I did take down the address of Sam's granddaughter when it came up. Begley ran out of steam after another five minutes or so.

"You got enough there?" he asked.

I nodded, then realized he couldn't see me. "Yeah. Thanks a lot."

"Say hello to Jilly for me and tell her she owes me one."

After I hung up, I looked out the window for a long time. I managed to shift gears from Paperjack to thinking about what Begley had told me, about wheels, about Sam. Finally I got up and took a shower and shaved. I put on my cleanest jeans and shirt and shrugged on a sports jacket that had seen better days before I bought it in a retro fashion shop. I thought about leaving my fiddle behind, but knew I'd feel naked without it — I couldn't remember the last time I'd gone somewhere without it. The leather handle felt comforting in my hand as I hefted the case and went out the door.

All the way over to the address Begley had given me I tried to think of what I was going to say when I met Sam's granddaughter. The truth would make me sound like I was crazy, but I couldn't seem to concoct a story that would make sense.

I remember wondering — where was my brother when I needed him? Christy was never at a loss for words, no matter what the situation.

It wasn't until I was standing on the sidewalk in front of the house that I decided to stick as close to the truth as I could — I was an old friend of her grandmother's, could she put me in touch with her? — and take it from there. But even my vague plans went out the door when I rang the bell and stood face-to-face with Sam's granddaughter.

Maybe you saw this coming, but it was the last thing I'd expected. The woman had Sam's hair, Sam's eyes, Sam's face...to all intents and purposes

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it *was* Sam standing there, looking at me with that vaguely uncertain expression that most of us wear when we open the door to a stranger standing on our steps.

My chest grew so tight I could barely breathe, and suddenly I could hear the sound of rain in my memory — it was always raining when Sam saw the ghost; it was raining the night he stole her away into the past.

Ghosts. *I* was looking at a ghost.

The woman's expression was starting to change, the uncertainty turning into nervousness. There was no recognition in her eyes. As she began to step back — in a moment she'd close the door in my face, probably call the cops — I found my voice. I knew what I was going to say — I was going to ask about her grandmother — but all that came out was her name: "Sam."

"Yes?" she said. She looked at me a little more carefully. "Do I know you?"

Jesus, even the name was the same.

A hundred thoughts were going through my head, but they all spiraled down into one mad hope: this was Sam. We could be together again. Then a child appeared behind the woman. She was a little girl no more than five, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, just like her mother — just like her *great grandfather.* Reality came crashing down around me.

This Sam wasn't the woman I knew. She was married, she had children, she had a life.

"I...I knew your grandmother," I said. "We were...we used to be friends."

It sounded so inane to my ears, almost crazy. What would her grandmother — a woman maybe three times my age if she was still alive — have to do with a guy like me?

The woman's gaze traveled down to my fiddle case. "Is your name Geordie? Geordie Riddell?"

I blinked in surprise, then nodded slowly.

The woman smiled a little sadly, mostly with her eyes.

"Granny said you'd come by," she said. "She didn't know when, but she said you'd come by one day." She stepped away from the door, shooing her daughter down the hall. "Would you like to come in?"

"I...uh, sure."

She led me into a living room that was furnished in mismatched antiques

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that, taken all together, shouldn't have worked, but did. The little girl perched in a Morris chair and watched me curiously as I sat down and set my fiddle case down by my feet. Her mother pushed back a stray lock with a mannerism so like Sam's that my chest tightened up even more.

"Would you like some coffee or tea?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I don't want to intrude. I..." Words escaped me again.

"You're not intruding," she said. She sat down on the couch in front of me, that sad look back in her eyes. "My grandmother died a few years ago—she'd moved to New England in the late seventies, and she died there in her sleep. Because she loved it so much, we buried her there in a small graveyard overlooking the sea."

I could see it in my mind as she spoke. I could hear the sound of the waves breaking on the shore below, the spray falling on the rocks like rain.

"She and I were very close, a lot closer than I ever felt to my mother." She gave me a rueful look. "You know how it is."

She didn't seem to be expecting a response, but I nodded anyway.

"When her estate was settled, most of her personal effects came to me. I..." She paused, then stood up. "Excuse me for a moment, would you?"

I nodded again. She looked sad, talking about Sam. I hoped that bringing it all up hadn't made her cry.

The little girl and I sat in silence, looking at each other until her mother returned. She was such a serious kid, her big eyes taking everything in; she sat quietly, not running around or acting up like most kids do when there's someone new in the house that they can show off to. I didn't think she was shy; she was just...well, serious.

Her mother had a package wrapped in brown paper and twine in her hands when she came back. She sat down across from me again and laid the package on the table between us.

"Granny told me a story once," she said, "about her first and only real true love. It was an odd story, a kind of ghost story, about how she'd once lived in the future until Granddad's love stole her away from her own time and brought her to his." She gave me an apologetic smile. "I knew it was just a story because, when I was growing up I'd met people she'd gone to school with, friends from her past before she met Granddad. Besides, it was too much like some science fiction story.

"But it was true, wasn't it?"

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I could only nod. I didn't understand how Sam and everything about her except my memories of her could vanish into the past, how she could have a whole new set of memories when she got back there, but I knew it was true.

I accept it now, just as Jilly had been trying to get me to do for years. When I looked at Sam's granddaughter, I saw that she accepted it as well.

"When her effects were sent to me," she went on, "I found this package in them. It's addressed to you."

I had seen my name on it, written in a familiar hand. My own hand trembled as I reached over to pick it up.

"You don't have to open it now," she said.

I was grateful for that.

"I...I'd better go," I said and stood up. "Thank you for taking the time to see me."

That sad smile was back as she saw me to the door.

"I'm glad I got the chance to meet you," she said when I stepped out onto the porch.

I wasn't sure I could say the same. She looked so much like Sam, *sounded* so much like Sam, that it hurt.

"I don't think we'll be seeing each other again," she added.

No. She had her husband, her family. I had my ghosts.

"Thanks," I said again and started off down the walk, fiddle case in one hand, the brown paper package in the other.

I didn't open the package until I was sitting in the Silenus Gardens in Fitzhenry Park, a place that always made me feel good; I figured I was going to need all the help I could get. Inside there was a book with a short letter. The book I recognized. It was the small J.M. Dent & Sons edition of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that I'd given Sam because I'd known it was one of her favorite stories.

There was nothing special about the edition, other than its size — it was small enough for her to carry around in her purse, which she did. The inscription I'd written to her was inside, but the book was far more worn than it had been when I'd first given it to her. I didn't have to open the book to remember that famous quotation from Puck's final lines:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,

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That you have but slumber'd here,
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream...

But it hadn't been a dream — not for me, and not for Sam. I set the book down beside me on the stone bench and unfolded the letter.

"Dear Geordie," it said. "I know you'll read this one day, and I hope you can forgive me for not seeing you in person, but I wanted you to remember me as I was, not as I've become. I've had a full and mostly happy life; you know my only regret. I can look back on our time together with the wisdom of an old woman now and truly know that all things have their time. Ours was short — too short, my heart — but we did have it.

"Who was it that said, 'better to have loved and lost, than never to have loved at all'? We loved and lost each other, but I would rather cherish the memory than rail against the unfairness. I hope you will do the same."

I sat there and cried. I didn't care about the looks I was getting from people walking by, I just let it all out. Some of my tears were for what I'd lost, some were for Sam and her bravery, and some were for my own stupidity at denying her memory for so long.

I don't know how long I sat there like that, holding her letter, but the tears finally dried on my cheeks. I heard the scuff of feet on the path and wasn't surprised to look up and find Jilly standing in front of me.

"Oh Geordie, me lad," she said.

She sat down at my side and leaned against me. I can't tell you how comforting it was to have her there. I handed her the letter and the book and sat quietly while she read the first and looked at the latter. Slowly she folded up the letter and slipped it inside the book.

"How do you feel now?" she asked finally. "Better or worse?"

"Both."

She raised her eyebrows in a silent question.

"Well, it's like what they say funerals are for," I tried to explain. "It gives you a chance to say good-bye, to settle things, like taking a — " I looked at her and managed to find a small smile " — final turn on a wheel. But I feel depressed about Sam. I know what we had was real, and I know how it felt for me, losing her. But I only had to deal with it for a few years. She carried it for a lifetime."

"Still, she carried on."

I nodded. "Thank god for that."

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Neither of us spoke for a while, but then I remembered Paperjack. I told her what I thought had happened last night, then showed her the fortune-telling device that he'd left with me in St. Paul's. She read my fortune with pursed lips and the start of a wrinkle on her forehead, but didn't seem particularly surprised by it.

"What do you think?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "Everybody makes the same mistake. Fortune-telling doesn't reveal the future; it mirrors the present. It resonates against what your subconscious already knows and hauls it up out of the darkness so that you can get a good look at it."

"I meant about Paperjack."

"I think he's gone — back to wherever it was that he came from."

She was beginning to exasperate me in that way that only she could.

"But who was he?" I asked, "No, better yet, *what* was he?"

"I don't know," Jilly said. "I just know it's like your fortune said. It's the questions we ask, the journey we take to get where we're going that's more important than the actual answer. It's good to have mysteries. It reminds us that there's more to the world than just making do and having a bit of fun."

I sighed, knowing I wasn't going to get much more sense out of her than that.

It wasn't until the next day that I made my way alone to Paperjack's camp in back of the Beaches. All his gear was gone, but the paper stars still hung from the trees. I wondered again about who he was. Some oracular spirit, a kind of guardian angel, drifting around, trying to help people see themselves? Or an old homeless black man with a gift for folding paper? I understood then that my fortune made a certain kind of sense, but I didn't entirely agree with it.

In Sam's case, knowing the answer had brought me peace.

I took Paperjack's fortune-teller from my pocket and strung it with a piece of string I'd brought along for that purpose. Then I hung it on the branch of a tree so that it could swing there, in among all those paper stars, and I walked away.

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BOOKS

JOHN KESSEL

THE BIG BOOK, WOMEN, AND GOD

Red Mars, by Kim Stanley Robinson
Bantam, 519 pp. $22.50

Time, Like an Ever-Rolling Stream, by Judith Moffett, St. Martin's, 328 pp. $21.95

Rainbow Man, by M.J. Engh
Tor, 253 pp. $17.95

IN OUR LAST episode I talked about cyberpunk. For a time there in the mid-eighties, Kim Stanley Robinson was the *bête noir* of cyberpunk's promoters, who attacked his writing as at best bogus SF and at worst no SF at all. Robinson's *The Wild Shore* appeared in the same year, and in the same Ace Specials series, as William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, and some saw a competition between the books over the future of science fiction. Neither Robinson nor Gibson descended into the public fray, but that didn't keep the noise level from overwhelming the signal.

Why did Robinson's work arouse such ire? A charge that received much attention but strikes me as a red herring was that Robinson was too ambitiously literary. I can't see any way that *Neuromancer*, with its heavy foregrounding of style and influences from Burroughs to Chandler, is an iota less literary than even Robinson's most self-conscious work.

More relevant was attitude. Cyberpunk embraces technology, but with a dystopian view of the institutions that will manage it. The cyberpunk hero is disaffected, a resident of "the street," and although he may actively combat power, he's pretty much convinced the struggle against the forces that control technology is doomed. A computer cowboy may find a haven in the inter-

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stices of the net, but the machine will roll on regardless of his efforts, and to try to turn it in a more humane direction would be like an ant trying to turn aside a steamroller.

Robinson, instead, is an organizer, a man whose reaction to ecological assault is to join the Sierra Club, to political oppression is to back the ACLU. He doesn't underestimate the power of social inertia, but he believes more fully in the power of individuals acting in concert to save the world.

Another difference is that, unlike the cyberpunks, who seem most at home at night in a smoky room, Robinson likes the outdoors. For the punks the body is a limitation to be transcended or cyborged; Robinson wants to live in his body, even celebrate it. Find me a cyberpunk hero who *likes* to exercise.

These differences give Robinson's work a positive quality that the cyberpunks unfairly disparaged as pollyannaish. They ignored that his work is more politically engaged than that of many cyberpunks. Where Gibson tends toward quietism (might as well upload yourself into a computer since the megacorporations are going to run your life anyway), Robinson has been willing to envision utopian alternatives.

To many of us at the time it seemed that the complaints about Robinson's differences obscured more significant similarities. Like the cyberpunks, Robinson embraces technology, and like them, he takes a counter-cultural view. The Bruce Sterling of *Islands in the Net* is not incompatible with the Robinson of *The Gold Coast.*

That said, I must observe that in *Red Mars,* (the first volume of a new trilogy, to be followed by *Green Mars* and *Blue Mars)* Robinson attempts what I said in the last column Sterling doesn't — to give us the characters, story, and scope of a Tolstoy. In doing this he risks grandiosity. But in *Red Mars* the gamble pays off big.

Red Mars tells of the establishment of the first colony on Mars by 100 settlers in 2026, and the ensuing thirty-six years of Martian development. Later waves of colonists bring new ideas and ethnic conflicts. UN authority over the expedition gives way to domination by transnational corporations on an increasingly desperate earth. Mars changes from an Antarctic-like scientific station to valuable commercial real estate. A longevity treatment offers new opportunities and produces political turmoil on earth. A debate rages between those who want to terraform Mars as rapidly as possible (the

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"Greens") and those who want to preserve Mars in its uninhabitable majesty (the "Reds"). As far as I know this is the first SF novel, out of the hundreds that have been written about Mars, to raise this ecological question. The various political struggles culminate in an immensely destructive revolution.

The story is told from the point of view of a half dozen characters, the three most important of whom are Frank Chalmers, John Boone, and Maya Toitovna. In correspondence, the British writer Gwyneth Jones has pointed out to me how the political conflicts in the book illustrate sexual politics and male dominance behavior. The struggle for control of the Martian future parallels the struggle between Frank, an advocate of realpolitik, and John, an idealist, over Maya. The subsidiary characters — Arkady Bogdanov, Michel Duval, Nadia Cherneshevsky, Ann Clayborne — are equally engrossing. Mercurial Arkady advocates a utopian break from earth. Nadia, an engineer, is so focused on building things that she only reluctantly brings herself to actually *see* Mars. Her opposite number, Ann, single-mindedly seeks to preserve the pristine Martian environment.

This big book is the novel Robinson has been growing to write, brilliantly executed. There's plenty of hard science here for the traditional fan, an engrossing plot, complex characters. *Red Mars* gives as vivid a picture of what Mars is likely to look and feel like as you will ever get in a novel. Robinson shows us as much of the Martian landscape as possible in the course of his story — perhaps even a little more than is wise, for the sake of the book's pacing. His love for the wilderness amounts in the end to an almost spiritual vision. Robinson doesn't have much sympathy for or interest in conventional religion (both fundamentalist Muslims and fundamentalist Christians come in for criticism in *Red Mars*), but he has a mystical faith in nature.

I have only a few quibbles. I would like to have seen more childbearing among the first 100 colonists. Also, with the exception of Michel Duval, the expedition's psychologist, there is little hint of their lives back on earth — many are in their forties when they leave, yet they carry neither baggage nor memories. Granted, in a situation like this the colonists would be selected for their willingness to cut themselves loose, but there ought to be more about previous marriages, children, family, histories of struggle before they got here. Leaving this out makes

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all these forty-five-year-olds, at times, seem twenty.

And I regret the loss of one of the characters, in particular, at the end: I can see how it rounds this volume off thematically — but it would have been interesting to see how this character would have dealt with the consequences of the action in the succeeding years.

One of the cyberpunk complaints against Robinson was that his was too conservative. Those who make this charge have too narrow a vision. It's conservative in the sense that Robinson believes in human values, which does not mean a rejection of technology, a support for the status quo, or a fear of the future. Robinson is an unapologetic ecological socialist: he sees disaster in any economic system that fosters unlimited growth in a limited biosphere. What makes *Red Mars* work is the hard headed way he embodies his politics in character, place, time, and event. Whether or not you agree with him, you have to be impressed by the way he's thought through the implications of human action in an alien setting, the way he's projected the consequences of current international resistance to change into the troubled earth that hangs in the background of *Red Mars*, and how the earth's political failings affect the way Mars "falls into history." All this comes together in what is for me the thematic center of the book, when John Boone gives an impromptu speech on the rim of Olympus Mons to an audience of colonists who have gathered to watch the fall of an ice asteroid into the atmosphere in the terraforming effort. The spectacle of the asteroid streaking across the sky above Mars, the political arguments between its observers, and the passion of Boone's sermon on the mount crystallize what is best in Robinson's fiction. It's positive without being sentimental, hopeful without ignoring the obstacles to hope.

This is the best novel I've ever read about the colonization of space. It has the heft and depth of a classic. I will be very surprised if a better SF book is published this year.

Time, Like an Ever-Rolling Stream is a sequel to Judith Moffett's 1991 novel, *The Ragged World*. In that book humanity is given an ultimatum by the Hefn, aliens who have visited us previously in history, and who are determined to save the earth. Ruthless ecologists, they don't care for human beings — they care for the planet. To end the population problem they have imposed a Baby Ban, using hypnotic suggestion to prevent humans from reproducing. Their

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drastic controls on technology have eliminated the private automobile, brought a new age of steamboats on the Ohio and Mississippi, and aroused the stiff opposition of humans who resent their severe, though non-violent rule.

Against the background of these momentous events, *Time* concerns the adventures of Pam Pruitt and Liam O'Hara, two teenage mathematical prodigies at the Hefn-established Bureau of Temporal Physics. The story takes place in 2014, when the fourteen-year-old Pam and Liam accompany the Hefn Humphrey to a place called Hurt Hollow on the Ohio River. Hurt Hollow is one of several places on the earth that seem to have a mystical connection with the past. The Hefn hope, by contacting the past, to help humans rediscover ways of living that keep humanity in balance with the earth. As Pam, Liam, and Humphrey explore Hurt Hollow, a resistance movement threatens the Hefn. The narrow escapes, captures, and conflict make this something of a teenage adventure tale, with a difference.

In some ways *Time* is a dangerous vision. In contrast to the long-held belief in SF that human beings are free, independent, and capable of creating for themselves a glorious destiny, in this book humans can no more control the products of their ingenuity than a dog can ride a bicycle. Alien intervention, instead of anathema, is good for us. Technological progress is not inevitable and good. Keeping in balance with the earth means that most humans are going to have to retreat to a 19th century lifestyle. Since, despite the fact that many people yearn for the simple life, we cannot bring ourselves to give up the luxuries that technology provides, the Hefn are going to have to step in and make us do what's right. And finally, whereas much SF from Wells to the present presents religion only as an obstacle to human progress, Pam is a believing Christian, and *Time* strongly implies that the universe has inherent religious rules, to the point where natural phenomena (such as tornadoes) may be expressions of god's will.

There's no reason why an SF novel can't take this viewpoint. But despite the fact that Judith Moffett is a friend of mine, I really don't like the Hefn as enforcers of ecological correctness. Perhaps I'm not being fair to the book, but Moffett's vision of a back-to-nature utopia strikes me as reactionary and the advent of the Hefn is a deus-ex-machina that obscures what is essentially a counsel of despair. I don't expect any Hefn to come down from space to save us, or

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expunge us if we don't shape up. Not that I'm confident we'll be able to solve the problems Judith Moffett is quite right to worry about — far from it — but is making everyone live in Hurt Hollow the answer? Although this tale itself has all the requisites of a rip-roaring teen adventure, this underlying despair keeps it from being much fun.

Whether Moffett means for us to buy the Hefn's plan outright depends on our view of the book's troubled central character, Pam Pruitt. *Time* is structured as a novel written by the twenty-five-year-old Pam telling about things that happened when she was fourteen. Some time between these events and when Pam writes of them, she suffered a nervous breakdown that destroyed her math ability and sent her back to live at Hurt Hollow. After each chapter are notes by the grown-up Liam, whom Pam has asked to comment on her story. This unusual structure enables Moffett to give us both a book and a commentary on the book. Through Liam's comments Moffett offers to explicate her novel for us within the pages of her novel. Most particularly she questions Pam's character and instincts.

"Hurt Hollow" is an appropriate place for Pam to end up. The details of her nervous breakdown are kept obscure, but we're told she has been undergoing therapy to uncover repressed memories. At fourteen she hated her body, was acutely embarrassed by her sexuality, did not want to have any boy attracted to her. In part the book seems to be about Pam's struggle to attain a healthy love for herself, and for normal men.

The fourteen-year-old Pam is infatuated with the Hefn Humphrey. She is jealous of Liam's friendship with Humphrey, longs for Humphrey's attention. Liam comments that her attitude toward the Hefn reflects her attitude toward her own father, with sexual overtones: "It's all fathers and it's all sinister, a little bit tainted." In an afterward he identifies her flight from sexuality as "gender dysphoria." Unfortunately, this is more a label than an explanation.

Pam's sexual troubles are the reactions of an incest victim. Yet we are told that, aside from being creepy about her sexuality, her father never touched her. A child doesn't have to be touched to be abused, but Moffett equivocates about the whole issue with regard to Pam. Is Pam's outlook warped by her experience or isn't it? Can we trust her opinions? Are they the same as Moffett's? If, as Liam suggests, her love for the Hefn is "tainted," how should that affect our

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judgment of the rules they impose on humanity? The Hefn (all of whom are male) are strict fathers, non-responsive, dictatorial, and arbitrary. Are they abusive ones? If so, can we take their strictures as really being "for our own good" any more than we can take Pam's father's casual remarks about her breasts as harmless jokes?

In a way all these questions are a tribute to Moffett's writing. Pam Pruitt is a real person. Her problems are real ones. Moffett's picture of the Ohio Valley is so lovingly realized that it leaps off the page, dense, pungent, textured. The Hefn are real, and strange. But my frustration remains. It's as if Moffett wants to turn a fundamentally dark vision toward optimism, but is too honest to evade the darkness; as if she wants to tell of Pam's struggle against abuse, but can't bring herself to face that subject. I have to commend this book for the questions it raises, even though I'm unsatisfied by the answers it offers.

Like *Red Mars*, *Time Like an Ever-Rolling Stream* invests an ecological outlook with underlying spirituality. But Moffett's belief in some godlike force moving behind nature's mask is more far reaching than Robinson's, and she sends down the Hefn, like servants of the old testament god, to set us straight. In *Red Mars* it's up to us.

In M.J. Engh's *Rainbow Man* a secular humanist explores religion.

Liss, a starshipper of the far future, leaves her ship and settles down on the planet Bimran, an idyllic sparsely populated world. The nomadic starships, because they travel at near light speed, are isolated from the normal life of planet dwellers by time dilation. Liss's decision to settle down essentially cuts her off forever from everyone she knows.

She does it, it seems, in the hope of ending her own isolation, of making a commitment to one place, culture, and time. Unfortunately, Bimran has some customs that are unfamiliar to her. The first of these is that, because Liss has been voluntarily sterilized, she is classified as a "man." Because of her colorful clothing she becomes known as "Rainbow Man."

The second is that although Bimran has no churches or priests, it is a religious society. Bimranites believe in heaven and hell, and more than that, in Bliss and Punishment. There are no churches or clergy, but there is a "Selection Center," whose "Selectors" pass through society observing citizens, choosing those who are good for Bliss, bad for Punishment.

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Much of the story consists of a series of socratic dialogues between Liss and Sarelli, a sardonic man who passes for an iconoclast on straight-laced Bimran, Doron, a sweet-natured young Selector, and Leona, another starshipper who has settled down on Bimran. Liss seems remarkably slow on the uptake for someone who has traveled as far and wide as she has, but perhaps her ignorance of religion is a matter of sharshippers' lack of one. She is the classic naive stranger in a strange land. Eventually Liss runs afoul of the hidden rules of Bimran, and trouble ensues.

As an SF plot *Rainbow Man* passes muster, barely. The bones of this story are a little arthritic and not very well fleshed out. There is enough mystery to pique the reader's interest, but the surprises aren't really very surprising. Liss, Leona, Doron, and Sarelli do not come to complex life. Bimran City doesn't have the feel of a real city; no markets, no street life, no schools, no politics, no children, no old people, no history, no future. Even when we are shown some of these things, Engh's writing forgoes sensory appeal. The result is a thin world that seems more like an idea than a place, as if this were a sketch for an Ursula Le Guin novel instead of the novel itself.

I don't think the reason for this is a lack of ability on Engh's part: in a few scenes, when she wants to, she produces evocative detail. It's that she's just not interested. The characters, setting, and story of *Rainbow Man* are mere clothing for Engh's interest in theological debate. Her energies are not fully engaged in creating Bimran, or Doron, or the action and intrigue of the plot — but whenever two of her characters come into ideological conflict, then the dialogue snaps and the ironies multiply. If you can get interested in a clash of ideas then you'll find this engrossing indeed.

A committed believer in any of various monotheisms, especially those that invoke the word of god to regulate human lives, is going to find *Rainbow Man* an uncomfortable read. With ruthless logic Engh teases out the horrifying consequences of even the most sincere belief in an all-powerful, all-good deity who allows evil to exist and appoints specific humans as his agents to reward or punish according to divinely inspired text. She is fascinated by the paradox of how good people, with the highest of motives, can do abominable things. Engh invents an imaginary religion on a distant planet, but her challenge is really to religion as practiced by Catholics, Jews, Baptists, Muslims, Mormons — choose your favorite monotheism. Engh picks the kind of fight with god, and especially with his church, that Twain sought in *Letters from the Earth* and "The

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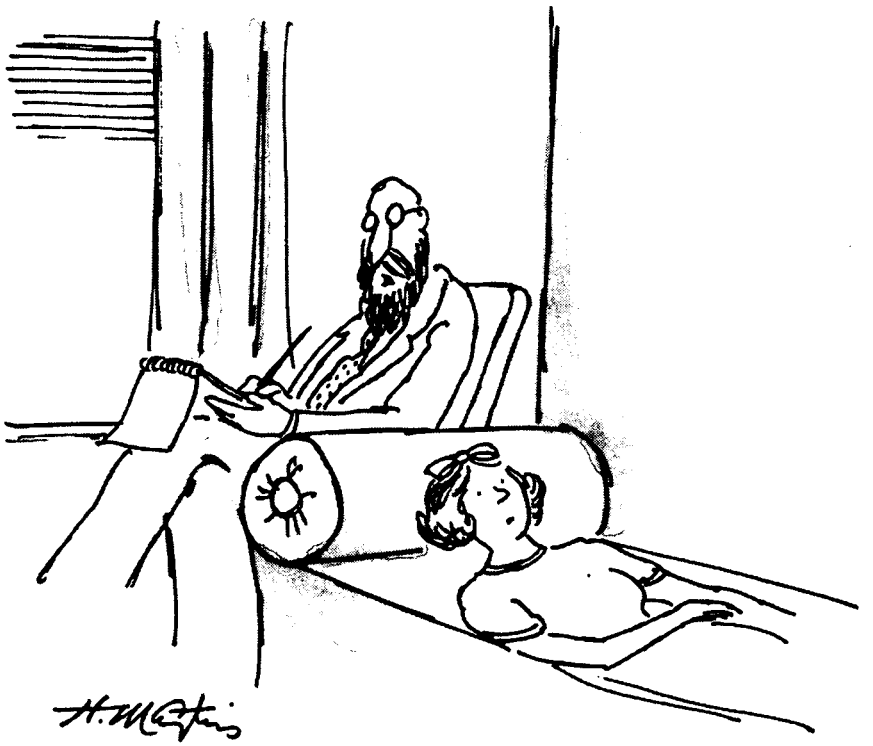
Mysterious Stranger." She embodies her questions in a series of debates like Melville's *The Confidence Man.*

In the end the story rises beyond philosophy to some degree of drama as Liss and Doron have to make certain hard choices. Idyllic afternoons in the park give way to intrigue, threat, and chase scenes, and, in the last chapters, to a tragic love story. It has nowhere near the density of *Red Mars* and *Time, Like an Ever-Rolling Stream,* and the characters are not the fully realized human beingsof those novels, but *Rainbow Man* shows how much stimulating thought alone can power an SF story.



"Now then, Ms. White, tell me about your relationship with these seven little men."

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Lisa Goldstein returns to F&SF after too long an absence with "Woman in the Painting." Lisa's newest novel, Strange Devices of the Sun and Moon, *has just appeared from Tor Books. Tor has also rereleased her first novel,* The Red Magician, *which won her the American Book Award.*

The Woman in the Painting

By Lisa Goldstein

25 June, 1858
My Dear Henry —

YOU WILL NOT BELIEVE WHAT a treasure I found yesterday. As you know, I had been trying to finish the painting I began last January, but it grows no closer to completion, and indeed I sometimes feel that it will never be done, that I will still be attempting it when I have grown too old and feeble to hold a brush. And yesterday I had an additional problem: the light was poor, a sooty, sunless London day. As the painting proved impossible I resolved instead to take a walk to clear my brain, and I headed toward the shops in Leicester Square.

And that is where I saw her, in a milliner's shop. At first, as I gazed at her through the dusty window, I thought her quite plain, with pallid brown hair and a thin ungenerous mouth. To be honest I don't know why I stared for so long, except that she posed a minor sort of mystery: she was not a shop-girl, and in some indefinable way I knew that she was not one of the ladies patronizing the store.

Then she turned and saw me. Do you know how some women seem to

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change their appearance in an instant? I cursed myself for thinking her plain. Her hair was not brown but long and thick and black; her mouth was red, her skin so white it seemed luminous.

I have thought about our first meeting several times since then, but I cannot explain the first glimpse I had of her. Perhaps when she turned to me my soul understood her as she truly is; perhaps (more likely, I admit) I had first seen her through a distortion in the glass.

I must have stared for several seconds, longer, I fear, than propriety allows. But when I came to my senses I saw that she was not offended. There was a dreamy expression on her face, a vague sort of confusion; everything in the store seemed equally a mystery to her, the hats, the shop-girls, the other ladies present. I yearned to paint her.

I went into the store, lifted my hat to her, and asked if I could be of assistance. She looked vastly startled, as if she had worked out that the store was inhabited only by women; my presence there threatened to pose a further mystery. Then her lips moved a little — I cannot describe so slight a motion as a smile — and she said, "You are very kind, sir."

When she first spoke to me she had a faint accent, a way of pronouncing her words as if she were more used to singing than speaking. Now, a day later, the accent is quite gone. I cannot account for this. Everything about her is a mystery.

She would have said more, I believe, but at that moment she collapsed into a dead faint.

Bustle, commotion, ladies stepping back in horror, shop-girls hurrying to offer her smelling salts. At length her eyes fluttered open — they were a deep blue — and she moaned a little. The confusion had returned to her eyes.

The shop-girls were concerned, of course, but when she managed to stand, aided by two or three of them, they could not think what to do with her. One suggested that she rest in a chair provided for the patrons of the store, but the others quickly demurred — the owner of the shop would return soon, and the owner, it seemed, was a terrible dragon.

And there matters would have stayed, had I not lifted my hat a second time and offered to find the woman's family. The girls turned to me gratefully, and in a short time I was leading this extraordinary woman through the streets of London.

Not knowing what else to do, I took her to a good restaurant and watched,

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amazed, as she ate a meal large enough for several stevedores. Her problem, then, had been simple hunger, as I had hoped; I had feared consumption, or worse.

And there my tale ends. She dropped off to sleep on my couch as soon as I brought her back to the studio, woke briefly this morning for another of her gargantuan meals, and is at present sleeping again. I have been able to find out next to nothing about her; she does not seem to know who her family is, or where she came from, or what she did before her collapse. I recited several names to her — Mary, Elizabeth, Jenny — and she responded strongest to Jenny, so that is what I call her.

She seems a gift from the gods. I wanted nothing more than to paint her, and here she is, delivered to my studio as if by heavenly messenger. I have abandoned the painting I had struggled with for so long and have started several preliminary sketches, hoping to use her as a model when she grows strong enough.

I trust that you and Kate are well. I know you both will understand if I ask you not to visit my studio for a few weeks — I am anxious to begin the new painting, and I work best with no distractions. I will write you as often as I can; our mail system, the best in the world, will see to it that I keep in touch with you.

Your loving friend,
John

26 June, 1858
Dear John —

I must admit that your letter disturbed me very much. For one thing, I would like the opportunity to examine this woman. I speak not only as a doctor but as one who has seen the ravages of consumption at close hand — for surely you remember when Kate's poor sister Anna died of the disease. From what you tell me it seems quite possible that this unfortunate woman, this Jenny, is also a victim of consumption. Like many laymen you seem to think that you have enough medical knowledge to make a diagnosis, and such a belief is dangerous, both to you and to her.

But you put yourself in moral danger as well. Surely you must see that it is quite impossible for her to live with you. If she is an honest woman who has lost her memory you compromise her to the extent that she may no longer

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be able to make her way in society. Even if you act the perfect gentleman with her your situation is one that is bound to cause talk. And no doubt she has friends and family who are frantic with worry about her — think of them, and of what the loss of their loved one must mean to them.

And if she is not a lady — well, then, in that case I fear you compromise yourself. In either circumstance you must stop your painting and make every effort to find this woman's family. Failing that, you must put her in a hospital. In any case, I would like to see her and make a diagnosis.

Your most sincere friend,
Henry

26 June, 1858
Dearest John,

I would like to add my voice to that of my husband, to ask you to allow us to come call on you at the studio. Henry and I have never forgotten your kindnesses to us during the dreadful year when my sister was ill, and we would consider it an honor to be allowed to repay you.

Your loving friend,
Kate

27 June, 1858
Henry —

IT IS not surprising that you abandoned painting when we were together at university. The surprise is that you became a doctor instead of a prating literal-minded clerk; you have the very soul of a clerk. Why must you constantly prostrate yourself before the god Propriety? There is nothing unseemly about my sharing the studio with this creature: she is ill, and cannot be moved for days, perhaps weeks.

You are my doctor, true, but you are not my conscience. Really, Henry, the accusations you make! I must confess myself surprised you did not go on to call me a white slaver. Please believe me when I say that she is as safe here as she would be in any house in England. And I am doing everything in my power to find her family.

And tell me, O keeper of my conscience, what would you have done with

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her? Where would you have taken her? She has still not remembered her family, or her occupation if she had one. I am afraid she is a prostitute, one of the many women who have come to London and have been unable to find work in more honest trades. And if that is the case then it is an act of mercy for me to use her as my model. Though society frowns on women who model for artists we both know that this is honorable work, and far more worthy of her than her former profession.

You will be happy to hear that I have started a new painting, one inspired by her beauty. She has lost the confused expression she had when I found her; she now seems regal, unmoved, as remote as an allegorical figure or an ancient queen. Of course I must paint her as Guinevere, waiting for Lancelot. I believe strongly that it will be the best thing that I have ever done.

Please do not come visit, as I cannot afford the time to receive you. I must take advantage of every minute of the day until the light fails. And even then, with the help of dozens of lamps, I am able to work, to paint in the background while She sleeps.

— John

28 June, 1858
My Dear John —

I am sorry if my letter offended you — you must know that I was only trying to offer my help. If you will not let me see this woman I hope you will tell me more about her. What are her symptoms? Does she grow stronger or weaker? Does she speak of her family at all? What was she wearing when you met her?

I hope that you are well.

Your sincere friend,
Henry

29 June, 1858
My Dear Henry —

I am happy to see that you have climbed down from your high horse, that you are able to discuss the matter of Jenny calmly. And you must know I never truly opposed you, my dear friend; of course she must be found lodgings as soon as possible. But, as I said before, she is far too ill to be moved now.

You ask about her clothes. They are of surprisingly good quality. I know

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next to nothing about women's clothing, but even I can see that hers are made of good fabric, with fine lace at the throat and wrists. Upon reading this you will, I know, return immediately to your earlier suspicions and tell me that she is a great lady, but I am now entirely convinced, for reasons I will tell you later, that this is not the case. It is far more likely, I think, that she had the patronage of some wealthy lord, and lost it again.

Besides, it no longer matters to me who she is. She is Guinevere.

She is also, unfortunately, quite mad, and this is why I do not believe she is a lady; no family of high birth would let their daughter wander the streets in her condition. She wakes several times a night and goes to the windows; once there she looks out at the stars for minutes, sometimes hours. If she were not so clearly a human woman I would think her an angel, longing for heaven. And she asks questions about the most ordinary things — What is a pen? What is a butter knife? She seems a blank slate, a canvas on which I may paint anything.

Yours,
John

30 June, 1858
My Dear Henry —

I write you in a state of high excitement. Before I can continue, though, I must ask you not to repeat, under any circumstances, what I am about to tell you.

I would also ask you not to judge me. I know you are worried about the possibility that I might corrupt this woman, but I must assure you that she was as eager for what happened as I.

She is, as I mentioned before, ignorant about things of the world; there is no guilt for her in matters of the flesh. Unlike most women she showed no coy hesitation as she removed her dress; rather, she seemed curious as to what might come next.

I write you not to boast about my conquest but to ask your professional advice as a doctor. For I have to tell you that when she removed her undergarments it seemed for a moment that her parts were not formed as are those of other women. For the space of an instant I saw nothing but a smooth expanse of skin between her legs. And then this skin seemed to unfold as I watched, petaling like a flower, or opening like an eye...

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So quickly did this happen that once or twice since I wondered if I imagined it. But I know beyond a doubt that it did take place.

My question to you, of course, is — Is such a thing possible? Have you ever come across such a thing in your practice?

Yours sincerely,
John

2 July, 1858
John —

No doubt you believe I should apologize for my sudden visit to your studio. I will not apologize, however. I believe I was right to call on you when I did, that your extraordinary letter absolved me of all blame. It is impossible for a friend of long standing to stand by while another follows a course harmful to himself and to others.

And now that I have seen the woman you call Jenny I know that I have a reason for my concern. You called her remote, disinterested, but having heard her story I could not see her as anything but a woman in the greatest distress. Several times, while you were not watching, I was certain that she looked at me with the most pitiable expression, as if she asked me to rescue her from the impossible situation which entangled her. She looked, in fact, a little like my wife Kate, though younger.

What have you done to her, to this innocent, unfortunate woman? I must confess that I cannot forget the contents of your last letter to me, and that I shudder whenever I remember how you used her. You must stop. You *must* remember that she is not in her right mind.

I even thought of severing all ties with you, of refusing to speak to you until the woman is returned to the bosom of her family. I feel, however, that her interests would be best served if I continued to press you to give her up. Kate and I would be happy to have her in our house until her family is found.

My father is ill; I am leaving for the country tomorrow to tend to him. Kate will remain in London. I urge you to write to her, to tell her how you are getting on with your search. It is unfortunate that women of good breeding cannot visit artists' studios alone, or I would have her call on you.

Yours most sincerely,
Henry

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3 July, 1858
Dearest Kate —

YOU MUST not believe a word your husband says about me. I am, in fact, healthier than I have been in years. I feel renewed, almost reborn. I am working harder than I have ever done in my life.

I have finished the painting of Guinevere, but I grew dissatisfied with it the moment it was done. How could I have thought her remote, unattainable? She is a woman like any other. I am painting her meeting with Lancelot — she will be the very personification of Carnality. It is my best painting so far.

I hope you are well, and that Henry will return soon.

Your sincere friend,
John

4 July, 1858
Dearest Kate —

Did I call her Guinevere? She is Morgan le Fay, the temptress, the sorceress, the lamia. She has ensorcelled me; I cannot rid my thoughts of her.

I have started another painting. I am determined to capture her, to fix her forever on canvas *as she truly is.* I am devouring her. No — she is devouring me. But if I can capture one iota of her beauty my paintings will be the talk of London.

— John

5 July, 1858
My Dearest Husband —

I must confess that I have visited John in his studio today. Please do not be angry — I am sending you his latest letter to me, and I am certain that when you read it you will understand my concern.

You told me that when you called on him he did not want to let you inside. I am afraid that he is now so obsessed with this woman that he is indifferent to visitors — he opened the door without asking for my name, murmured a few words and nodded absently, and then motioned me in. Once

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I was inside the studio, however, he seemed to forget my presence entirely, and paid no more attention to me than he did to his furniture — less, in fact, since he painted his furniture.

His studio was lit by dozens of lamps and candles, all of them artfully arranged to show his Jenny in the best light. Do you remember that horrible gargoyle candelabrum, the one he displayed proudly at a dinner party until we all begged him to hide it away? That was there, resting on the floor, the wax dripping slowly into its open mouth.

Against the wall I saw a half-finished painting of Eve offering the apple to Adam, and another of a sorceress luring a figure, possibly Merlin, into a cave. The canvas on his easel held the barest outline of a tall dark-haired woman. The colors were astonishing, vibrant and strong. He said in the letter I enclose that his paintings will be the talk of London, and I do believe that if he shows them they will not be soon forgotten.

I must tell you I was very alarmed by his appearance. His face was pale, his eyes sunken; his clothes, which were stained with paint, were as rumpled as if he had worn them for a week or more.

If I was worried by him, however, I became even more concerned about the woman Jenny. You said that she seemed pitiable, uncertain. At first I did not find her so at all; she looked hard, all glittering surface, a little cruel. But after a while — No, I will tell you the story in the order in which it occurred.

She lay against his divan, dressed in white and green. Golden jewelry glinted against her neck and at her fingers. As he worked the sun came out, shining so brightly through his windows that I had to squint to see against it, but he did not pause to douse the lamps. I remember what you told me, that he is in great want because he has not sold (or indeed completed) a painting in quite some time, and I was alarmed at his profligacy.

He stopped for a moment and looked around him. He swore horribly — I will not repeat what he said. Then he looked at Jenny and said, "Where is my other paintbrush?"

She said nothing. I truly believe she did not know. He paced up and down the room, agitated. "Answer me!" he said. "What do you have to say for yourself? Nothing — I assumed so. You were nothing before I found you. Where did you put my paintbrush?"

I had to speak in her defense. "She doesn't know," I said, timidly enough. "Can't you see that?"

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"Hold your tongue!" he said to me. "Don't defend her to me. You don't know what she is."

I could not think what to say to this. Before I could answer, however, he left the room, still cursing, to look for his paintbrush.

I took advantage of his absence to study the woman Jenny. And at that moment the most extraordinary thing happened. She seemed to — to change her shape. She was no longer the woman of his paintings, aloof, cold, cruel, but fragile, thin and pale. She looked like nothing so much as my sister Anna before she died.

I asked her her name and the name of her family. She seemed not to regard me at first, but gradually I thought she warmed to me; she even tilted her head to the side as Anna used to do when she wanted to concentrate on something.

I think it is true that she is quite mad. She told me that she had come from the heavens, that when night fell she could point out the very star that is her home. I asked her if she thought she was an angel.

"An angel!" John said, coming back into the room. I turned to him, startled by his sudden entrance. He laughed. "Where are the other angels, then, all the heavenly host?"

She shook her head. "Lost," she said. "All lost, and I have forgotten much — "

"An angel," John said, laughing again. "You do not know her, or you would not say such a thing. She is a very devil, a devil from Hell."

"She is nothing of the sort," I said. "She is a poor harmless woman, a lost soul. She deserved better than to be found by you."

"Nonsense," he said. "I rescued her. If I had not taken her to my studio she would have — well, you know what happens to women of her sort. She is lucky to be here."

He wiped his face, which was wet with perspiration. We were all terribly hot — the heat blazed from the windows, and the candles and lamps, as I said, still burned around the room. I forced myself to become calm.

"John, my good friend," I said, trying to speak in soothing tones. "How can you say she is evil? You know nothing about her, nothing at all, not even her station in life."

"She is a temptress," he said. "She will be the death of me yet."

"Come — look at her, see her how she really is. Don't you think she

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resembles my sister Anna?"

He turned to her — we both turned to her. And there, on his divan, was the image of my poor dead sister. How could I have thought her cold, cruel?

His face changed in an instant. "Dear God," he said. He wiped his face again on his sleeve. Then he hurried to one of the pieces of paper scattered around the room and began to sketch.

I looked over his shoulder and saw a drawing of Anna, her large eyes, the pale skin with the two red spots of consumption on her cheeks. As I watched he drew several bold lines, and then several more — wings. He had made Anna an angel.

I remembered that he had regarded my sister as a saint, especially in the last terrible days of her illness. "I see," he said, talking as if to himself. "I see it all now. I will capture her yet — she will not escape me."

Once again I did not know what to say. I was certain that he was mad, as mad as she — a *folie à deux*. I turned and left quickly.

I agree with you that the woman should be placed in a better situation as soon as possible. Your suggestion that she live with us until her family is found seems to me a good one, and good-hearted as well — you are, as always, a charitable man.

I hope that you are well, and that your father is improving. I would like to have you home again, so that we may do something about this dreadful situation.

Your loving wife,
Kate

7 July, 1858
Kate —

I CANNOT THANK you enough for your insight into Jenny's character. There is a brilliance about her that is hers alone; when I fixed a strand of pearls at her neck they kindled into light, as if they caught fire from her. She is an angel — that explains the innocence I saw in her when I first rescued her. I need her, need that innocence, to start afresh, to be reborn. She makes me see everything in a new light.

— J.

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20 July, 1858
Dearest Henry —

These past two weeks I have felt the most terrible apprehension for John. I waited anxiously each day for the morning and afternoon post, but nothing arrived from him. My worry grew to such a pitch that I felt I must visit him again, despite your prohibition.

Accordingly I called on him at his studio today. (You must forgive my shaking handwriting — I am still terribly alarmed by what I saw there.) My dear Henry, I am sorry to tell you that the situation is worse than ever. He is emaciated, his face sunken, his eyes huge. Flies buzz around the remains of his meals, rotting meat and vegetables, and the room has a terrible smell. I do not think he has eaten in several days. And she — she is thinner and paler than ever. My heart goes out to her, poor creature.

The room was dim, shadowy — all of the lamps were out, and the candles were nearly extinguished, leaving pale clots of wax on the floor. The sun, which had burned so brightly the last time I visited, had gone behind a cloud, and a thin rain fell. Dusty fans and feathers and tin crowns lay scattered about the floor.

And yet there was a strange light in the room. I hope you will not think me as mad as he is if I tell you that the light seemed to come from her, from her lambent face and skin. She was still pale, still thin, her eyes huge — she seemed to be consuming herself, spending her life, as Anna did. I cannot tell you how horrible it was to see this woman suffering so — it was as if I were condemned to watch Anna die twice.

When I looked away from her I could see small lights gleam in the shadowy corners. Some of the light came from the facets of the paste gems with which he had draped her, but others — oh, how I longed to leave, to simply turn and run out the door! — I fear some of the other light came from the glint of rats' eyes in the darkness. They came out to eat the food, and neither John nor Jenny had the strength to chase them away.

Despite the odd light he continued to paint, pausing only once to coil a chain of gold around her arm. "She is ill," I said. "She must be seen by a doctor."

At first he did not hear me. He moved away from her, overturning the gargoyle candelabrum at his foot, and studied his model. Then he said, "She is not ill, though she may seem that way to you."

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"How can you say that? She — "

"She is changing, becoming something new. Haven't you noticed? — she appears in a new light from day to day." He lit a match the light flared up briefly in the darkness. The smell of sulfur lingered for a moment in the room. He bent and lifted a candle, lit it.

"What do you mean?"

"She was remote, a queen of antiquity," he said. He began to pace. The candle lit his face from beneath, made his eyes into hollows, his eyebrows into spread wings. "Then she became carnal, a fleshy woman. And an evil sorceress, and an angel...I don't know how she does it, but she — she responds to me somehow. And to you as well — to everyone. You changed her into Anna, didn't you? Your husband thought she resembled you."

"What do you mean?" I asked again, backing away. Nothing I had seen in this room had prepared me for this lunacy.

"But what is she?" he asked. His pacing grew agitated. "She is mystery, an unknowable mystery. You feel it too, you must. She blazes like a fire, but what will happen if she begins to fade, to gutter out like a candle? I must discover the answer before she dies, before we both die. And I will discover it — I will burn her down to her core."

"You're mad," I said, and turned and fled.

My dearest Henry, I have thought of nothing but that poor woman since I left John's studio. I pray that your father regains his health soon, and that you return to me, and that together we may take Jenny from him and place her in our care.

Sometimes — sometimes I wake in the night, and see the stars from our bedroom window, and I wonder if John could be right. What if we each see in this woman what we want to see? It's true that she appeared to me as my sister, and you as me, and to John, it seems, as every woman he has ever desired.

What if she did come from the sky, as she told me? What better way to ensure her safety among us than to appear as the thing we most love? But then who is she, what is her true appearance? What will happen if John does as he threatens and burns her down to her core?

Your loving wife,
Kate

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27 July, 1858
Dearest Henry —

I am sending you the last letter I received from John. I became alarmed even before I read it, and if you but glance at it you will see why. The handwriting is chaotic, unruly — as he says he wrote the last part completely in the dark.

After I read the letter I hurried to his studio. I found him motionless and dazed, but — God be thanked! — still alive. All his candles had gone out, and only a fitful light came in through the window. Heaps of things lay scattered across the room — in the dim light they were no more than shadows. There was no sign of Jenny.

I brought him home with me, not caring what the neighbors might think, and I fed him. After a little while he responded to my ministrations. He refuses to speak of Jenny — all I know comes from the letter I enclose.

Your loving wife,
Kate

K. —

I HAVE NO more food. I have no more candles. For our old friendship's sake I beg you to come to my studio and give me what you can.

And yet I am not in the dark, for the light that comes from her is strong enough to guide me, grows stronger as I watch. I do not know what she is. I know she is changing one last time, and that I am changing as well. Perhaps this last change is death.

Look! — She is — she is shedding everything, all the costumes and jewelry I gave her, all her disguises. She is shedding her skin as well, she is emerging —

And I see — I see Her. She flares, she shines! I know — I understand — But she is gone.

How can I tell you what I saw? I understand now that she was not unknown, but unknowable. She never changed at all, in all the time I knew her — it was I who changed in my efforts to understand her. She was everything, illumination. And my mind could not grasp what she was, and so I put a familiar face on it, called her Jenny, as you called her Anna.

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Her light has gone out, extinguished like a candle. But it is enough for me to have understood her for a single second, for her to have illuminated the entire world for me. It is enough to know that for a moment I partook of mystery. Because I am truly in the dark now, with only my pictures and my memories.

—J.

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Michael Cassutt is a writer-producer with the new ABC-TV series, Sirens. *He is also collaborating with Mercury astronaut Deke Slayton on his autobiography. Macmillan has just released a revised edition of Michael's biographical encyclopedia,* Who's Who in Space.

Michael says "The Folks" has its inspiration in two places. First, his great-uncle who has moved from the frozen Middle West for a new life in the Sun Belt. "I don't think he's really cut the old family ties," Michael writes, "but he's damned hard to get hold of these days, what with his busy schedule."

The story also comes from the idea that, in the early 21st Century, the United States will be a country in which mature people will be a majority — a political force as powerful as the baby boomers were in the Sixties and Seventies. Michael is already planning ahead— at the turn of the century, he hopes to be part of the powerful elite.

The Folks

By Michael Cassutt

FIVE MILES PAST THE OLD Confederate Air Force Museum turnoff on Highway 83, just when he thought he'd finally put the suffocating Cameron County traffic system behind, Dave Manulis found that his Budget Rental was developing severe parameter limiting. It wouldn't go over forty-five no matter how much he accelerated.

At first he thought it was because he wasn't used to driving a Proton. (He'd always preferred the Japanese electrics to the new Ukrainian ones.) Then he saw that nobody else on the highway was going any faster. He queried the system and found that he'd been handed off from Cameron County to Hidalgo County. Where the speed limit, according to the readout, *was* forty-five. On the *highway*.

For the second time that day he wished he'd simply taken a bus from Brownsville to McAllen. But the heat and the queue at the counter had discouraged him. Besides, he was a born and bred California driver. . . at age sixty-five he'd logged forty-nine years behind the wheel. It would have been

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unpatriotic to pass up a chance to drive some open road.

If only he'd been able to find it.

He logged in his destination—the Senior Community of Sun Villa South—and, ignoring the uninspiring landscape of scrub, dirt, and golf courses, tried to doze off. By the time he got the environmental system tuned the way he wanted it, the car had reached the gate to Sun Villa South.

There was a single gate building, too white and tiled to be called a shack, set in a prison-camp-style double fence. No parking lot; only a turnaround. Sun Villa South itself was apparently some distance down the road.

The gate guard was a Latino about Dave's age. Probably a retired cop; Dave had expected a kid. "You get a lot of breakouts?" Dave joked, nodding at the fence.

"That's to keep unauthorized people out," the guard said, clearly not amused. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No. I was just in the neighborhood."

"I'm sorry, sir. Then I'll have to ask you to turn around."

Dave laughed. "Okay, I'm here to see Ray and Dorothy Manulis."

The guard checked his console. "They're not expecting you."

"It's a surprise."

"I'm not authorized to allow surprises."

"I can see that. Look, what's the problem? You need some I.D.? You want to search the car or something?"

"No, sir. I'm only telling you that unless you have a guest pass, you can't come in."

"I'm their *son*, for Christ's sake."

The guard looked him over for a moment, then handed him a phone. "You're welcome to call."

Dave was glad he remembered the number: he had the clear impression this was some kind of test. He dialed and heard his mother's voice on a machine. "Hi, Mom, this is Dave. . . Surprise. I'm trapped at the gate here. It's 2:45. Help." He handed the phone back to the guard. "They weren't home. So now what do I do?"

"You're welcome to wait."

Dave looked around. "Here? It must be a hundred degrees."

"You could return to town and wait. I'd be happy to forward a message."

"I'll wait." He slammed the car in reverse and backed into the turn-

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around.

This was just the kind of situation that always got him into trouble. Thirty years in the health bureaucracy, processing claims, dealing with caregivers and receivers, and his temper would *still* go critical at the slightest stonewalling. (Once an obnoxious luggage agent at LAX had even had him arrested.) He counted to a hundred while he considered — and rejected — a mad rush at an open gate. He tried to remember routines from classic Eddie Murphy movies that could be adapted.

Then a Starving Seniors eighteen-wheeler pulled up to the gate. Some new resident, a refugee from Minneapolis, maybe. From the way the guard and the driver joked around, it was clear they'd done this routine before.

Dave got an idea. He pulled out of the waiting area, waved good-bye to Jose, then turned left, going back the way he had come. As soon as the truck blocked the view of the guard shack, he whipped the Proton across the road and pulled back into the entrance. . . a little behind the truck.

When the gate opened wide to let the truck go through, the Proton squirted through first, unseen.

Dave had realized at halftime during the Barcelona-London game Sunday evening that he hadn't spoken to his parents in a month. Knowing that was ridiculous — knowing that if he just happened to fail to call them, that they *always* called him — he began to wonder if that stuff about the eradication of Alzheimer's was just so much propaganda. "Honey, what's your name again?" he called to Jennifer.

"What did you forget this time?" That was one of the things he loved about Jennifer: he could skip a lot of conversational preliminaries.

"My last conversation with the folks. It must have been on the twelfth, but. . ."

"You didn't talk to them on the twelfth. We were at Harrison's — "

" — Graduation party. Right." He thought. "That's strange, too. Their great grandson graduates from high school, and they don't show up?"

"David, they're in their nineties — "

"And in better shape than I am. But I was there."

"You *drove*. They have to fly all the way from Brownsville. You know how horrible the connection is."

"Did they send a present?"

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Jennifer fixed him with a look. "Tell me what we gave Harrison."

He had no idea. "All right, but they didn't even call. That's highly unusual."

"What are you suggesting?"

That was the hell of it: you always heard these stories about old people —older people, Dave corrected himself— being found dead in their ratty little apartments after two weeks. The neighbors would start to smell something. . .

But the folks were in great shape. And there were two of them.

Of course, there was always murder-suicide. That wasn't likely: Dad wouldn't consider death until he could no longer golf. Mom might have killed him, of course, having been driven insane by Dad's obsession with golf — and no court in the land would ever convict her. But why would she kill herself?

Unless there was some kind of serial killer. . . some crazed caregiver who was tired of being pushed around by seniors. . .

"Are you about through?"

Dave realized he was thinking out loud. "Why don't I just call?" He reached for the phone, tapping out the number even as he remembered it was in autodial, and got the message.

He called later that night, twice. And got the message. "It's three o'clock in the morning! Where are they?"

"I'm sure they used to wonder the same thing about you."

He called his sister Wendy in Buffalo Grove, Illinois, and found that she hadn't heard from the folks in three weeks, either.

When four more calls over the next day and a half all found the message machine, he decided to visit.

DAVE HAD visited Sun Villa South only once, the year the folks moved in. He realized with some alarm that that had been twelve years ago. And things had changed: there were at least a couple of new developments along the main road, all identical white stucco with red tile roofs. Some young, typically resentful caregiver had scrawled graffiti ("Seniors Die!") on a retaining wall. And when Dave reached "downtown" he found there actually was one. . . dominated by a huge new Cigna Care Center on one end and a Wal-Mart at the other. Strung

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out between them like jewels were what appeared to be two dozen ice cream shops and restaurants.

Use of vehicles like the Proton in downtown seemed to be discouraged, so Dave stashed the car behind a Ben and Jerry's. Except for the Latino support staff and professional caregivers, all in white, the streets were largely deserted — no surprise, since it was the middle of a summer day in Texas. Die-hards would be golfing, of course. And there were probably shoppers in the Wal-Mart. But only a few aged souls moved about. Dave found himself the recipient of approving nods, and hoped he was getting points for being someone's good son — and not because he looked like a resident.

Ray and Dorothy's place was on Lawrence Welk Lane near Claude Pepper Avenue. He bought himself a chocolate chocolate cone, and tried the folks' phone again. Message. Finally he boarded a tram.

He had forgotten the house number, but recognized the family Nissan in the driveway. He went to the door and spent two minutes examining the elaborate entry keypad until deciding to just try it.

It was unlocked.

For a brief, horrifying moment Dave thought he was going to find Ray and Dorothy dead. . . but there were no decomposing bodies in the living room.

"Hello?" he called.

He heard rustling and voices coming from the back bedroom. Dorothy must have the TV on. "Mom?" he called again, and started down the hall.

Then he stopped. Something about the sound. . . it was very regular. . . maybe the washer was on. No, it was more like a workout tape —

Holy shit, he was hearing people screw! What was Dorothy watching? The Arts Channel?

"Hello. . . " he called, more forcefully this time. Suddenly the moans ceased. "It's me, Dave."

The door to the bedroom was halfway open. He pushed at it.

Dave had made a couple of mistakes. Ray, not Dorothy, was in the bedroom. And the TV wasn't on. Because Ray wasn't alone.

"Jesus," Ray said, by way of hello, rolling off a red-headed woman who was not Dorothy. "Don't you ever call?"

"Relax, Ray," the red-headed woman said. Drawing the sheets around her — Dave could not help thinking that she had done this a few times — she

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extended her hand and said, "I'm Jean. You must be Dave."

What else could he do? He shook. "Uh, sorry to barge in like this." He tried to smile. "The door was unlocked." He swallowed. "I've been calling for three days." Jean was slim and tanned. And not a day under eighty.

Ray had pulled on a pair of baggy shorts and smoothed down his fringe. As he sat down on the bed and patted Jean's hand, Dave realized he was looking better than he had in years. He'd lost the potbelly he'd worn since Nixon was president, and had gotten some sun. Too much sun, maybe: he was still wrinkled like old silk and with the spots and the various surgical zippers looked like an eighteenth-century treasure map. But he was moving pretty well. To Dave he said, "Your mother is in charge of the phone. She must have left it on."

"This is probably an awkward question, but where is Mom?"

Ray looked at Jean and blinked. "She was going out with Walter this afternoon," Jean prompted.

"Oh, yeah. Walter Linssen. They'll be back around five. Walter and I are gonna play nine before it gets dark."

"Why don't I get a drink or something?" Dave suggested.

Ray and Jean. Mom and Walter. What the *hell* was going on here?

THIS WAS the second time Dave and Ray had collided across a disheveled bed. The first was in 1973; the woman in the bed was Debbie Morrissette and the man in a state of coitus interruptus was Dave. He was spending the summer at home following his first year at Northwestern. If 1973 wasn't exactly the opening gun of the sexual revolution, it was one of the early laps. Living in a dorm for the past ten months had alerted Dave to the notion that girls liked to make out, too. And he had gotten Debbie Morrissette — who had never given him a look when he was still in high school — home, in his bed, drunk, braless, skirtless at one A.M., with no trouble at all. All right: they had gotten a bit noisy. When Ray appeared in the doorway. "Jesus," he had said, "I thought you were throwing up in here." He had merely stared at the blissfully semi-conscious Miss Morrissette, then added: "You'd better take her home. And for Christ's sake, use your head next time." Meaning don't bring young women into your bedroom when your parents are at home.

He hadn't. In fact, not long after that he went back to Northwestern. . . and

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never really lived at home again.

Dave wanted to make himself a vodka tonic, but the folks had never been ones for having much liquor in the house. Ray was good at making frozen daiquiris during the summer. Any other time you had to get by on a glass of white wine, or, if you were lucky, a beer.

Sure enough, there was no beer or wine. There were bottles of multicolored gunk in the refrigerator, but they all had prescription codes on them. Dave found a pitcher of daiquiris — half empty. The other half, Dave assumed, was in glasses in the back bedroom. So the choice was a shot of rum or a daiquiri. He got a spoon and went for the frozen stuff.

He stepped back in the living room long enough to hear panting and moaning coming from the bedroom. Damned if they hadn't gone right back at it! Ninety-four years old! Dave swirled the daiquiri slush in the pitcher. What was *in* this?

Then the front door opened, and in walked Mom and a man Dave assumed was Walter the golfer. Dorothy looked great, too. She'd tinted her hair kind of a gold color for so many years that Dave could hardly remember what its true color was. But she had lost some weight and also gotten tan and spotted. She looked at Dave as if she'd never seen him before. "Hello?"

"Mom. . . it's me. Dave."

Dave counted. It took four seconds for the name to register. "Dave!" she said. "You surprised me. I couldn't quite see you in that light." That was Dorothy, all right. She already had that familiar crossness in her voice, making it clear that her failure to recognize him was somehow his fault. "This is Walter."

Walter was as big around the middle as he was tall. "Hiya, Dave!" He stuck out a hand and squeezed so hard he left finger marks on Dave's wrist. "Sorry! Implants." Walter flexed his hands. "Better grip for golfing." Dave had heard about them, of course. A week didn't go by that his fax didn't clog with the latest biocosmetic marvels — all of them free when he, too, became a senior.

Dorothy was heading for the bedroom. "Um. . . Mom?"

She looked at Dave. Another three seconds went by. "Oh, Dad's in there?" Then she did an unusual thing, calling, "If you two are just about finished, we're home!"

She went past Dave into the kitchen. "Time for your medicine, Walter!"

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she trilled, pulling one of the bottles of colored gunk out of the refrigerator. She poured two carefully measured shots into glasses, and she and Walter clinked glasses and drank. Only then did she say to Dave: "What brings you here?"

"Mom," he said, "I've been calling for three days. No one answered. You never go out of town anymore. So I got worried."

"You could have called the office."

"Well. . . " He might as well say it. "Did you guys forget all about Harrison's graduation?"

"Harrison?"

"Chad's youngest. My grandson."

She answered as if it were the stupidest question she'd ever been asked. "I remember *Chad!*" Then she frowned. "He graduated in 1995!"

Well, she was sharp enough to remember Chad's high school graduation date — something Dave had to think twice about — but not enough to remember that Chad had a son. Was this some kind of mutated Alzheimer's? Or was it just Dorothy being Dorothy?

Right then Ray came out of the bedroom wearing his golf clothes. He kissed Dorothy on the cheek. "Jean wants to know if you can go to the movie," he said. "Back at seven." He was at the door before he turned to Dave. "Staying the night?"

"If it's okay."

"I think so." Ray and Walter left.

A few moments later Jean, all put together, came out of the bedroom, too. "See you tonight?" she said to Dorothy.

"I'll meet you in front of the Cineplex." They air-kissed. Jean said to Dave, "Very nice meeting you." And off she went.

Dorothy noticed that Dave was drinking daiquiris with a spoon. "Let me get you a glass."

IT WAS a long-standing Manulis tradition that problems weren't discussed, perhaps in the hopes that if nothing were said about them, they just might go away. So no one talked about the time Ray got arrested for driving under the influence (1971). Not a word was said about Dorothy's therapy (1969-78). There were no angry scenes over Wendy's drug usage (1973). The list of

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approved topics for dinner conversation had been limited to sports, goings on about town, and gossip about non-family members.

So it was natural for Dave, not to mention Dorothy, to spend the next couple of hours pretending nothing unusual had happened. They caught up on Wendy and husband Ted and their kids, Daniel the gerontologist and Mariah the oncologist, and on Daniel and his awful wife Darlene, who used to be a caregiver, and their son Jared, and on Mariah and her new husband Zachary, who was a claims specialist like Dave, and their kids (Mitchell, Hannah, and Emily) and his kid, whatever his or her name was.

Not to mention Dave and Jenny's three: Mallory, Chad (who was doing so well at DermAesthetics now after years of being professionally and financially adrift) and Julia. And their respective spouses, Brent, Bianca, and Ray. (Dorothy had never gotten over the fact that one of her granddaughters married a man with the same name as her husband. "It makes things so confusing!") Mallory and Brent had Annelise and Daphne. Chad and Bianca had Ross, Rhiannon, and Harrison — the high school graduate. And Julia and Ray had two, Esther and Benjamin, with another one on the way.

Just running through the names and updating the changes in jobs, residences, and health took ninety minutes. Dave wished he'd thought to bring along his laptop. He was glad he'd talked to Wendy recently, or he not only wouldn't have been able to come up with some of the news... he would have blanked on some of the names.

"Heavens, look at the time!" Dorothy said about seven o'clock. "You must be hungry. We hardly seem to eat anymore."

"That's okay. I can find something." In fact, Dave had been wondering about food, but Dorothy had never really liked to cook, and Sun Villa South, with its alley of restaurants and snack shops, was designed so that one need never cook again.

He opened the refrigerator. The refrigerator held little except for the colored gunk. He picked up one of the bottles. "Maybe I should just have some of this?" he joked.

Dorothy snatched the bottle away. "Not until you grow up," she said. She'd used the same voice taking a beer out of his hands when Dave was eleven.

Ray still hadn't returned by eight o'clock. "Should we be worried?" Dave

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asked. They had managed a meal of Floribbean chayote salad, which to Dave was about as good as munching on a cereal box.

"He always says he'll be home at seven and he's never home before eight."

"Doesn't it get dark?"

"The course is lighted."

"Well," Dave said, taking the chance. "I guess you're not worried that he's sneaking around with another woman."

Dorothy never paused in her rhythmic cleaning of the table. "We've been married for sixty-nine years," she said. "Do you have any idea what that means?"

"Next year is the implant anniversary?"

She had always ignored his jokes. "It means that people change. We're still good for each other... we still want to be together. But we have no more surprises. We've all become interested in other things."

"Like this Walter guy?"

"Walter and Barry and Lawrence..." She stopped. She was actually blushing. "I seem to have quite a following in the community."

"*Everybody's* doing this? What are they running here, a commune?"

"Well, your generation got to try it. Why shouldn't we?" She smiled. "Maybe you were all just too young."

"I sure was. I missed the whole thing."

Dorothy had gone into the bedroom. She came back with a couple of pills and handed one to Dave. "What's this?"

"I guess they call it HSD."

Dave had heard of HSD. It was a brain booster and stimulant. "Isn't this highly illegal?"

"Not in Hidalgo County. Go ahead, try it." She popped hers into her mouth and crunched.

What the hell, if his ninety-three-year-old mother could...

The next hour was the happiest of his life. Ray came home; Dorothy went out. Dave just smiled and thought about the kitchen tile.

He communed, he shared, he experienced. He sang a few bars of "Kumbaya." For the first time ever he found himself connected to the world around him... to the senior enclaves all over the south and west, with their satellite caregiver ghettos... their golf courses and Baskin-Robbins... the

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genetic therapies and the implants. . . knowing that soon it would all be his. His and Jennifer's.

Some people didn't survive to become seniors, of course. He knew that from his job. Cancer, airplane crashes, or murder got one out of every five. Dave realized that they were the weak ones who got tossed off the sled to satisfy the wolves. So that the rest would go forward. Why hadn't he thought of this before?

It would be great to be seventy. Better to be eighty. The height of ecstasy to be ninety. . . and healthy. And to have it all paid for.

The kids would do the work. It was their turn. The kids would pay for everything.

The kids.

Dave found himself staring at the wall outside the bedroom. When he'd moved Ray and Dorothy in twelve years ago, the wall had been full of family pictures. Dave and Jenny and Wendy and Ted and Daniel and Jared and Mariah and. . .

It was as if their previous life — their life with him — had ceased to exist. He felt as though *he* had ceased to exist.

Dave had sobered up. He went into the living room and found Ray sitting in front of sports on the TV. Dorothy was off at the movie. Dave found the control and turned off the TV. "Dad. . . I want you to come with me."

Ray looked at him as if he'd never seen him before. "I was watching that," he said.

"For God's sake, it's *yesterday's* Senior Master's. Watson won, all right? Come on."

He tugged Ray out of the chair, and took him out to his electric cart. "Where are we going?"

"To find Mom."

Like creatures from a zombie movie, Sun Villa's seniors largely came out at night. Dave wondered briefly how they all got so suntanned.

The Wal-Mart side of the promenade was jammed with happy couples, not one of them under seventy.

Dave let Ray do the driving to the Cineplex, which was halfway to Cigna, and the parking lot beyond. The marquee listed half a dozen features. "Which one was she going to see?" Dave asked.

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"Lost Horizon."

"It'll be over in a few minutes. We can wait."

"Mind telling me what we're waiting for?"

"We have to have a talk. The three of us."

"Ah." Then, in classic Ray Manulis style, he tuned out.

Rather than examine his plans and motives too closely, so did Dave. Presently Dorothy and Jean came out of the Cineplex. "Look, Dottie," Jean said slyly. "Two hunks. Shall we pick them up and take them home?"

"Jean, could you give us a few moments?" Dave said.

Jean smiled, then patted Dorothy on the back. "I'll see you tomorrow. 'Night, Ray."

Without a word, Dorothy got in the cart. It was a tight squeeze. "Well?" Ray said.

"My car is in the lot."

They drove around the Cineplex, passing the Cigna center. In the cool of the evening, rows of seniors had been brought outside to sit in wheelchairs, staring into space. "Is that where they put you when your money runs out?"

"Treatments don't work on everyone the same, dear," Dorothy said, as if Dave should know that. "Where are we going?"

"Home."

"We *are* home," she said.

"This isn't home, this is some kind of concentration camp. I can't let you stay here."

Ray just started to laugh. "It took you all this time to figure that out? When was the last time Dave was here, Dorothy?"

"Twelve years ago."

"All right, so I haven't been a visitor. I'm here now, and I don't like it."

"Well, frankly, son, we don't give a damn whether or not you like it."

"We're happy here," Dorothy said.

"But you're cutting yourself off! Your whole life is what goes on right here! What about your children? Your grandchildren? Don't you care about them anymore?"

Dorothy was the first to break the silence. "Of course we do, dear — "

Then Ray interrupted. "Let me tell you something, son. I'm ninety-four years old. I never expected to live this long. Hell, none of us did. This is unexplored territory for everyone.

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"I was your father for maybe twenty of those years. Maybe eighteen. That still leaves me seventy years — threescore and ten — *on my own*. Shit, you're almost seventy yourself. How much do you have to do with *your* grandchildren?

"Do I *care*? Let's just say I'm glad to have had you and Wendy, just like I was glad I made it through sixth grade. But I'm not in sixth grade anymore."

There was a certain brutal logic in that. Dave and Wendy had caused Ray and Dorothy a lot of pain. Probably more pain than pleasure, when you looked back on it. How much fun were children, really? When they were born? Maybe. Up to age three or six? Certainly. After that, as teenagers? College students? Even his own kids, who were not bad compared to any kids he'd heard of, had spent far too much time shacked up, broke, pregnant, and confused to suit him.

And out of his life. Out of town. Out of touch.

Dorothy had her arm around him. "Come on home, Dave. Get a good night's sleep."

What else could he do? They were his parents.

THE NEXT morning Ray drove him back to the lot. He was saying, "Get your application in now, son. We'll be able to sponsor you, but there's a waiting list."

Dorothy had promised to meet them. Where was she?

"The moment I get home, Dad." He opened the door of the Proton and got in. As he was buckling in, Dorothy came running up. She gave him a hug and a kiss through the window, then handed him a small package. "What's this?"

"It's for Emily," Mom said. "One of Mariah's."

A last kiss and a wave, and he pulled out of the lot. It was going to be a beautiful day here in Hidalgo County. The golf course looked inviting.

He picked up the package and examined it. Emily.

Now. . . which one was she?

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Stephen Dedman makes his first appearance in F&SF *with a wry piece of humor. Stephen has sold short fiction to* Pulphouse, Aurealis, The Last Dangerous Visions, Blood and Roses, *and* Down Deep. *Stephen lives in Australia with his wife, and her lapsed feral cat, whom she acquired from the local library.*

As Wise As Serpents

By Stephen Dedman

My father's parents were Boers (you can spell that any damn way you like) who fled South Africa just ahead of black majority rule. My mother was the first Australian Aborigine to be granted refugee status as a member of a politically persecuted minority. It gives me the sort of perspective an anthropologist should have. It also makes me socially unacceptable almost anywhere, which is why I wasn't at the Mall when it happened; that, and the fact that Vpokga(ro)tjj speaks better English than the President. Besides, protocol always bores the shit out of me. I wasn't even watching it on the Lo-V, and when the phone rang, I was so thoroughly otherwise engaged that it took me half a minute of Tai Chi to disengage and grab the handset (no one in their right mind keeps a videphone by the bed). "Sara van Elven. This had better be good."

There was a horrible silence at the other end, then I heard Pastorelli mutter, "Uhhh...no. It's bad."

I gestured to Jerry, who began collecting my clothes from underneath

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Evan, who miaowed indignantly. "What is it, Lui?"

"The reception for Vpokga(ro)tjj...."

"Yes?"

There was another horrible silence, then, "She shot the Secretary of State and the Director of the N.S.A., and she won't tell us why." He paused, and then added, "And the Lagva slowboat arrives in four days. If we haven't found out why before then..."

The Lagva have faster-than-light travel, artificial gravity (apparently the two go together like politics and corruption) and pocket antimatter power plants. They've also never invented television, which I regard as irrefutable proof of their superior intelligence (the more traditional explanation is their poor eyesight: the chlorine they breathe can cause bizarre visual distortions), and also meant that no one on Earth really knew what they looked like until Vpokga(ro)tjj landed. It turned out they resemble humans almost as much as spiders do, if you know any spiders that stand about seven feet long. They are bilaterally symmetrical, with distinct heads, necks, and torsos, six muscular-looking legs (any three of which can serve as arms, gravity permitting), one mouth complete with lips and something like teeth, one mouth without, three eyes, and dozens of strategically placed ears. What the Hell, I've seen uglier people (usually standing outside nightclubs), and Vpokga(ro)tjj had been a paragon of civilized virtue from the moment her shuttle had landed until she... "Why was she armed, anyway? I mean, isn't she supposed to be an ambassador?"

Pastorelli tsked. "The rule against ambassadors carrying weapons may not be literally universal, Sara. It actually seems to have been part of her gauntlet...or boot, or whatever you choose to call it...

"And it may not have been a weapon at all. It may have been a signaling device, a high-tech equivalent of a flare-gun — "

"A message laser." Okay, so I read SF when I was a kid, and writers still come to me for advice. "Or a reaction pistol. Or a Swiss army knife. Hell, if they *exhaled* at us, it'd be a hostile act. Sorry, Lui; I don't think too well at this time of the morning."

He shrugged, very slightly, and we drove on for a while in silence: like most Italians, Lui feels it's bad manners to talk with his hands full. "Don't tell me *no one* was expecting violence." He grunted. "Not even the

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professional paranoids?"

"There hasn't been a real war since last century," he evaded. "I guess it slipped our mind. Besides, if it came to a fight between Earth and the Lagva mothership, how would *you* bet?"

"I hope the whole thing's taped?"

"Of course."

"But not broadcast?"

"There was a seven-second delay on the broadcast; they managed to lean on the switch as soon as the shooting started. Everyone who was there has been sworn to secrecy or kept under wraps, so we may actually have three days before it gets out...though I wouldn't bet on *that*, either."

"Were you there?"

"Yeah...I tried to get you an invite, but — "

"Forget it. It wouldn't have been my sort of party, even without the two corpses — " Lui grimaced slightly. "*More* than two?"

"Three shootings; the third is still alive, but only just. He was further away, and the beam left a hole in his chest twenty centimeters wide and two deep."

"Who was he?"

"Aleister Ponzi. Ad man."

"What was he doing there?"

"He ran the last two winning Presidential campaigns."

I digested this. "So, would it be reasonable to say that Vpokga(ro)tjj shot and killed three of the most powerful men in America?"

"Probably the three most powerful," replied Pastorelli, glumly.

It's coincidences like that that took the stigma out of paranoia. It just *had* to be a coincidence. Didn't it? "How much do the Lagva know about us?"

"I don't know. They've been listening to our radio broadcasts for a century now, and television and holo-V...but none of the three victims were...*visible*. Not like the president; I mean, he gets the job because he looks good on holo-V, everyone recognizes him, the Secret Service *expects* him to get shot at occasionally, it's part of his job description. Touhy, Maledon, and Ponzi..." He shook his head.

"Did Touhy say anything before...?"

"I don't know. I wasn't close enough to hear, but I think there was a mike in his tie-pin. You'll have to ask Sergei."

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I leaned back in the seat and smiled for the first time that morning. Sergei Ivanovich Arseniev had been one of the last great KGB administrators before the collapse of the USSR put an end to a promising part-time career as Moscow's cheapest and most discreet source of anti-viral software, back issues of *Xxxenophile*, and tickets to anywhere. The rumor that he is still wearing the same suit thirty years later is untrue; he was wearing Levis and a fur hat and posing as an American tourist, with a photograph of Dan Quayle in his passport. I've known him socially since he came to one of my lectures on Navajo dialects; he is gluttonously curious, has an amazing knack for languages and the best memory I've ever encountered, and would probably be Deputy Director of the CIA by now had his boss not mysteriously recovered from a heart attack in '27. I wasn't any more confident that we could solve this fuck-up, but at least I might enjoy it.

THEY WERE keeping Vpokga(ro)tjj at the Little White House; I don't know where they were keeping the Vice President. The guard at the gate didn't like my jeans and NARAL T-shirt, and I spent nearly a minute talking into his tie-clip before Sergei came to my rescue. "Sara! Wonderful to see you! How is Evan Jellicle?"

"He's fine." Sergei breeds cats in his spare time — mostly snow leopards and Siberian tigers. "How's Vpokga(ro)tjj? Is there anything left to ask her?"

He smiled, sourly, and led us down a corridor crowded with Ph.D.s in thousand-dollar suits. "Oh, we've *asked*, but she still won't talk. At all." He used the Lagva pronoun for "adult female, not pregnant, sexual preferences none of your goddamn business." All that in two syllables; the Lagva are very good with pronouns. "It would help if we knew her *name* — Vpokga(ro)tjj just means 'pilot of single-occupant craft' — but presumably they have a tabu about giving their names."

A well-known astrophysicist sniffed at us as we passed. "This is a highly advanced race; do you honestly think they — " I shut him up with an obscene suggestion, and reminded him that *everyone* had tabus. He blinked, and then agreed with me. I kept walking, hurriedly; Sergei has a stride like a Martian fighting machine, which probably isn't why his ex-wives call him "Tripod." "Of course, that really *could* be her name, but I'd hate to think what it says about their society. I've met lots of Smiths, Coopers, and Fletchers, but none

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of them made horseshoes, barrels, or arrows...and I've never met anyone named Programmer or Astronaut." He shook his head. "I've tried talking to Vpokga(ro)tjj in Lagvan, but even if I'm saying what I think I'm saying, I probably sound like a two-year-old with a cleft palate."

"Sergei, you once made a *skull* confess!"

"Yes, but that was a *human* skull. Besides, that took hours; here we just get half an hour to talk to her before some other expert butts in. I wasn't at the reception, either; they just called me out of retirement this morning. It took me twenty minutes to find my tie."

"You shouldn't have bothered. How did they get her here?"

"Six Secret Service agents picked her up and carried her to a van," answered Pastorelli. "She didn't put up any resistance. She's now in a sealed case of shatterproof glass, still wearing her suit; apparently, it has food and air, sorry, chlorine, enough for the four days until the slowboat arrives."

"If she's tried to contact the others," added Sergei, "it hasn't been by any method we can detect. Neutrino beams, maybe, or subspace radio. Personally, I don't think she's uttered a sound. She may be too embarrassed."

"What leads you to that conclusion?" asked Pastorelli.

"Anthropomorphizing," he replied.

"Fair enough."

"The spies" (all security and "intelligence" people and plain clothes cops were "spies" to Sergei) "think she hasn't fought back because she doesn't like the odds, or because she needs to conserve power. Personally, I think both schools of thought are full of shit, but I haven't any better ideas. Sara?"

I glanced around the corridor, at the suits and other uniforms. "These experts..."

"Yes?"

"Were any of them female?"

There was a momentary silence, and then Sergei shook his head. "None that I've noticed. This is Royal Secret, and..."

"When can I have my half an hour?"

"She can have mine, if it's quicker," said Pastorelli, before Sergei could answer. When I opened my mouth to protest, he added, "Purely selfish motives. It'll give me time to think of something."

Sergei grinned, and told us to wait where we were. "Thanks, Lui," I whispered, as soon as he was gone.

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"Don't mention it. If that bastard can't get her to talk, what hope have I got?"

I watched the holotapes of the reception, and the autopsy photos of Touhy, Maledon, and Ponzi. I didn't notice anything that would have caused me to pick them out of the crowd, but then, I'm not a Lagva.

Vpokga(ro)tjj was reclining on cushions in her glass-lined room, looking remarkably like the Sphinx at Gizeh — except that her eyes, mouths, and noses were in the wrong places, of course. "My name is Sara van Elven," I said. "Is there anything I can do for you?" There was no reply: for all I knew, she might have been asleep, or catatonic, or dead. "We can fill the room with chlorine, if you want to open your suit..."

"No," she replied, in a voice she must have borrowed from the Royal Shakespeare Company. Probably Hamlet's father. "Thank you."

"Food?"

"No, thank you."

Two essentials down, and one to go. "Something to read?"

This time, she actually moved. "Would that be possible?"

"Sure. Whatever you want. We're only a few blocks from the Library of Congress."

"Library, I understand," she said, "but Congress — this is method of reproduction?'

"No. This is opposite of 'Progress.' I can have them bring in a terminal — which is a small computer linked to a larger computer, not a life expectancy — with access to everything they have."

She looked at me as though she wanted to smile, but didn't know how. Cautiously, I smiled back without showing my teeth (it's considered gauche or aggressive in many cultures, even some human ones), and no one shot at me. So far, so good.

"You're sure she could see you?"

"Yes, but I don't know how clearly. Does she seem to be having any trouble reading?"

Sergei shook his head emphatically. "She's devouring the stuff, and following a fairly consistent pattern. She starts each train of thought with the Encyclopedia, and follows it through to a greater or lesser level of specializa-

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tion, then returns to the Encyclopedia. She started with a broad outline of human history, then the history of science, then back to the Encyclopedia, then on to human physiology, then psychology and mental disease...at the moment," he glanced at the monitor, "she's reading medical texts on parasitology."

I sat up. "Parapsychology?"

"The study of parasites," said Sergei, flatly. "I suppose there is some similarity between the two fields.... Anyway, according to this, she's spent the last half a minute staring at pictures of tapeworms." Pastorelli and I glanced at each other. "I don't understand it either," Sergei added. "It certainly doesn't apply to Touhy; he had a gut like a zeppelin. Maledon worked out like a maniac, and Ponzi had a black belt in hypochondria. Hold on..." He looked back at the monitor. "Now she's reading a biology text on classification of animal species...and according to this, she's gone from tapeworms to lampreys to snakes."

"Snakes?"

"Snakes."

THE LAGVA had been careful (or so it appeared) not to tell us anything about their biology, technology, or history, but they *had* given us a phonetic Lagva-English/English-Lagva dictionary, which made fascinating reading. The most important concepts in a culture are always represented by the shortest words. They're either old words, or words we use too often to bother with more than two syllables — which is why the automobile became the "car," the telephone became the "phone," the oral contraceptive became the "pill," and a variety of weapons became "guns"...or they're both, like "sex" or "food" or "war."

Sergei was good with languages, though he didn't know linguistics (which is rather like the difference between being immortal and being licensed to practice medicine), but he quickly understood what I was looking for. "One of your more forgettable politicians, when I was a boy, claimed that the Russian language contained no word for freedom, and therefore we were a race of slaves and slavers." Pastorelli, who knows no Russian, nearly dropped his coffee cup. "He also claimed that trees caused more pollution than industry," Sergei continued. "He was wrong both times, of course, but

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he had a very good advertising company."

He found a four-syllable Lagva word for "war," and scratched his chin noisily. We'd all been awake for more than thirty hours straight, by now, and things were starting to blur for me. "All of their technical terms are jawbreakers, too," Sergei continued. "If you're right, that means they haven't had spaceflight for very long at all...which is interesting, because their word for 'aliens' is Ar^v, only two syllables.... Of course, there *are* cultures that insist on long words for everyday concepts, but that only happens if the language comes from the government down, not the people up. The French still try and fail, Bismarck loved inventing jawbreakers to replace words he considered 'imprecise,' and I guess we've all heard of wars being called 'police actions'..."

I nodded wearily. The rule held for racial stereotypes, too: racists tended to use shorter words, probably because they used them more often. I glanced at the Lo-V picture of Vpokga(ro)tjj in her glass room, and part of my mind started wandering back to the Greeks and the Scythians. It was the first time the Greeks had ever seen men on horseback, and they assumed it was all one creature, the centaur, a man's head and torso and a horse's ass. The Amerindians, Aztecs, and Incas had done the same when they'd seen the —

Something in my head went *clunk!* I looked at Vpokga(ro)tjj, and then at Sergei and Pastorelli. "Sergei, has anyone else been able to get Vpokga(ro)tjj to talk?"

"Not that I know of, and I think I would've been told..."

I stared at the screen again, and then started fumbling through the books for the tape of the reception and the shootings. "The others have all been male, right?"

"As far as I know, but...are you saying Vpokga(ro)tjj won't speak to strange men?"

"No. I'm not sure she would even have recognized me as female. Some of those men are smaller than I am, some have longer hair, some are darker, some have higher voices, some of the military even have bigger busts. But there's one thing they all have in common..."

I fast-motioned through to the shooting, and then rewound slightly. First Touhy. Then Maledon. Then Ponzi. A moment later, I was grinning like an idiot.

"I don't get it," said Pastorelli.

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Sergei stared...and then his jaw dropped. "The Power Tie."

"What?"

"They're all wearing the same necktie," I said. "Yellow, with little dark blue scales..."

"Paisleys," corrected Sergei. "I've seen Touhy wearing it before, but I never — "

"Snakes," I said. "Constrictors. Lampreys. Tapeworms. Parasites. Neckties."

The slowboat landed three days later, to be met by a delegation wearing open necked shirts (though I bet most of them crawled back into their neckties as soon as the Lagvas's backs were turned). Vpokga(ro)tjj told us the story of the Gahla'wat, the race of intelligent wormlike parasites that wrapped themselves around their victims' spinal cords and tapped into their brains, enslaving them. Their own society seemed to be a gerontocracy, enforced by their changing color every time they shed their skin (the blue-speckled yellow was a sign of very great age indeed) — though some Lagva believed that the Gahla'wat themselves were a genetically engineered slave race of another unknown intelligent species poorly adapted (or too damn lazy) for space flight, and that the colors indicated a particular artificially created mindset. Either way, the Gahla'wat had conquered dozens of very different worlds that way; only the Lagva (as far as she knew) had been able to resist them. I suppose a movie version of the whole thing is inevitable; Sergei sold the rights while the rest of us were still marveling.

I wasn't invited to the landing, of course; I wouldn't even have watched it on the Lo-V if Sergei and Pastorelli hadn't materialized on my doorstep brandishing bottles of vodka. "Vpokga(ro)tjj said to say hi," said Sergei, as the camera panned across a row of dignitaries all nervously fingering their collars. "The Secret Service decided it was safe to show her the Smithsonian. I tried to call you, but you didn't answer."

"I was asleep. You should try it sometime."

"She thinks that our superstitions about snakes may indicate that we've encountered the Gahla'wat at some time in the distant past. She says it would explain our fear of the big constrictors, and our myths about snakes being intelligent or aggressive — the serpent in *Genesis*, the way cobras are worshipped in India, the Serpent Kundalini.... It's also supposed to explain

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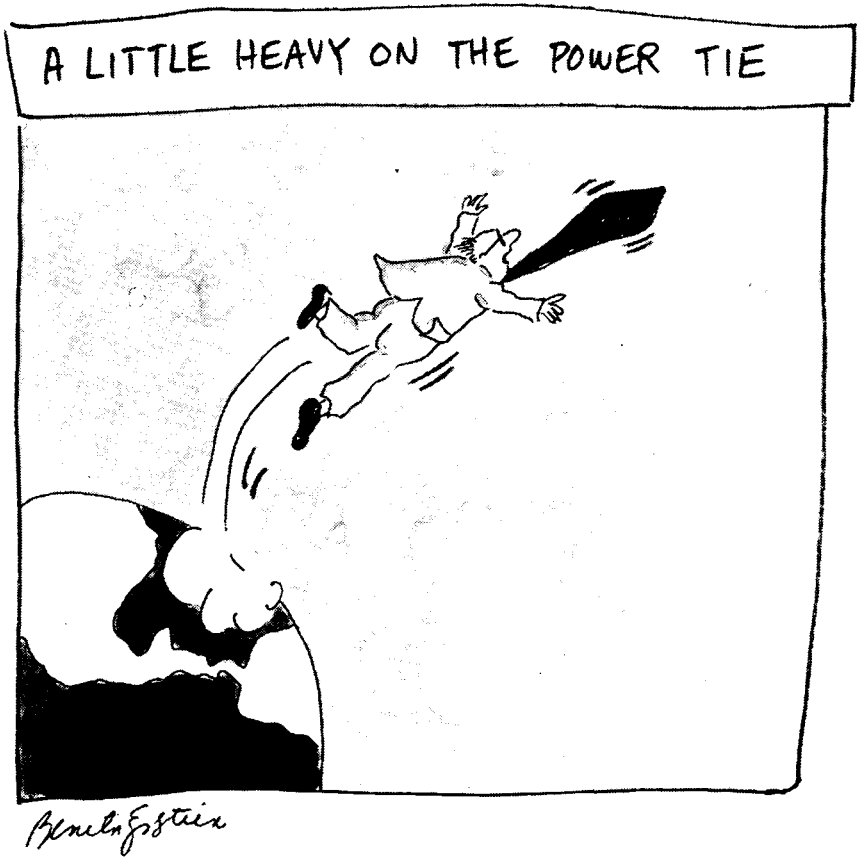
why neckties, which are just useless pieces of rag, are supposed to indicate our social status and our conformity with a particular class — or a particular school, or regiment, or corporation. All nonsense, of course." He stroked Evan, who was curled up in his lap. "Conspiracy theories always are, and this ancient astronauts crap is even worse. There's never been an alien race controlling *our* minds, has there, cat?"

Evan looked up, shook his head, and purred loudly.



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Michael Armstrong and his wife, Jenny Stroyeck, live in a log cabin in the woods near Anchorage, Alaska. He has taught a variety of courses at the University of Alaska, including Creative Writing, Science Fiction, and Dog Mushing. Most of his short fiction has appeared in F&SF *(the most recent story being "Termin'ator" in July of 1989), and he has published two novels through Warner Questar:* After the Zap *and* Agviq: Or, the Whale.

"Catch the Wotan!*" is a story that Michael originally wrote for an anthology to be published by Pulphouse Publishing called* Rats in the Souffle. *Michael says this story is a warm-up run for a deep space novel he plans to write, one he calls "beatniks in space." "Catch the* Wotan!*" has no beatniks, but it's a good, hard sf story of the kind that is much too rare these days.*

Catch the *Wotan!*

By Michael Armstrong

THERE WERE RATS IN THE *soufflé again.* As Sims and the first mate gently shoved him adrift and away from the *Wotan,* the simple mnemonic device echoed through Barker's head. *There were rats in the soufflé again.* He tumbled and flailed, sun, ship, stars, sun ship stars, rats in the soufflé until he got himself stabilized, until the Deimos survival suit rotated, with Barker inside it, around a longitudinal axis running from atlas to coccyx down his spine.

He drifted a hundred meters out from the *Wotan,* the sun at his feet and the great void before him. Barker tapped a suit thruster and moved back toward the *Wotan.* As if in reply, as if the first mate Ryles or the propulsion engineer watched him, the bow thruster flared for a quick second, and the *Wotan* pulled away. Barker saw the game, thought rats in the soufflé again, and did not give chase. He let himself be caught up in the embrace of the great alone.

The *Wotan* fading away, now five hundred meters, now a klick, now

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two, no referent offered him relief from that all and mighty embrace. His visor encompassed a complete field of view, so that he saw not a dim window at the tunnel of his space suit, but the absolute and complete all of the universe.

The Milky Way spread before Barker, a very soufflé of stars, in fact, and he a rat falling quickly into it. A near infinity of stars glowed before him, from the distant dust of the galaxy to bright Arcturus and Regulus. No stars twinkled — up out of atmosphere for only a year, that still surprised him. No twinkling; instead, the stars glowed steadily — suns, warming broiling nuclear furnaces parsecs distant. He almost imagined their warmth. Off his port hand Mars gave him guidance, showed him the way out to system's edge. Before him, Jupiter floated. Mars to port, Earth to starboard down by his feet, and Jupiter, straight on until morning.

Incredible beauty, he thought. Absolute, infinite, and totally weird beauty.

Like a rat, in a soufflé.

In a soufflé? The mnemonic came back to him again, the thought of food making him hungry, and he tongued the dispenser by his chin, then stopped. There were rats in the soufflé again. In the basic survival class you had to take to get your union card, that was the phrase his instructor, Tai, had drummed into his head. There. Were. Rats. In. The. Soufflé. Again. A stupid phrase, Tai said, but that was the idea. You remember stupid things, and if you ever wound up adrift in a Deimos model deep space survival suit, "there were rats in the soufflé again" would be a damn good thing to remember, because it might just save your stupid human ass.

So he remembered, and went through the list.

There: Temperature. In absolute zero, you had to keep your internal temperature constant. Get a thrust axis stable, Tai said, otherwise you'd never get a stable thermal gradient throughout your suit. So you used precious fuel to put your body on an axis parallel with the plane of your ship's vector. Then you set your suit into "barbecue mode," rolling around on a long axis, one rotation an hour, so no one side faced the sun too long. When necessary, you turned the seat heaters on, or the coolers, but sparingly, sparingly.

Were: Water. Next to air, water mattered most. A Deimos suit came with hardly any food, partly to save weight, but also to save water. You saved water by slowing metabolism, making fewer demands on the kidneys,

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keeping temperature constant so you didn't sweat. Not pissing saved the suit's recycling systems, too. Conserve water.

Rats: Rations and resources. You had to know your limits, Tai said, had to know what the suit could and could not do, what *you* could and could not do, how long the rations would keep you alive, how you could stretch them, how you could use them in other ways. The Deimos suit was versatile — part life raft, part spaceship, part shelter — and you could shift some parameters, alter some capabilities, like burn your air supply in a blast of thrust, at the expense of others. Resources and rations.

In: Initiative, the big one, Barker remembered. Initiative was all, his instructor Tai had said. You had to want to survive and you had to think you could survive and you had to want to *think* how to survive. If you cared, you had initiative, and if you didn't care, you should just open the air cock and save yourself ten days of drifting hungry, smelly, and reeking of stale piss.

The: Temperature again, in case you forgot, but also time. Beyond the resources of the suit, the other limit was time. If a spacer became so unfortunate to float adrift in a Deimos suit, time would be a major factor. The suit could only be so big before it became useless, because the idea of the suit was that anyone on EVA wore one, because you never knew. It was like wearing a life vest on the deck of a ship. If the vest was too bulky, no one would wear it, and you couldn't work in it. So the Deimos suit gave you only so much time: only so much air, only so much water, only so much propellant, only so much power. But there was another factor, Barker remembered, a good reason why the Deimos suit had a ten-day limit: the human body could only take so much cosmic radiation. Hardened but not impenetrable, the suit protected a human from most anything the solar system could dish out, save a solar flare — the risk you always took in an EVA, but acceptable at more than one AU. But it didn't protect entirely and not forever. Time mattered, even with all the air in Africa.

Soufflé: Shelter and strength. Shelter mattered again, how well the suit kept the body protected, how well it processed wastes, how well it regulated temperature. Beyond the barbecue mode maneuver and a few such other things, there wasn't much Barker could do about the suit's shelter. Strength, though. . . strength mattered, he remembered Tai saying. You had to be strong, both physically and mentally strong. You had to keep alert, ready to make decisions, ready to adjust to changing factors. A ship could come within

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a klick to rescue you, but if you weren't awake enough to maneuver the suit's thrusters to come closer than that, you might as well be a parsec away. You had to conserve your strength, ration your capabilities, keep alert and alive.

Again: Air and Attitude. Air, of course, the crucial factor, both oxygen to breathe and oxygen as propellant: you had to have air, could use propellant at critical times. Air and water gave you the limits of your endurance — ten days average, sometimes twelve, there had even been the case of a small woman staying alive for fourteen days, though her kidneys failed. You had to think about air, Tai said, think about not wasting it.

And Attitude — attitude counted as much as initiative. They went hand in hand, Tai said: attitude gave you initiative. You had to want to survive, had to endure the harsh pain of living. You had to reach down inside and find whatever it was that kept you going. If you didn't find it, you were dead.

"Spirituality," Tai also called attitude, and being good atheists — because only the crazies up in the sky cans had gods, not any self-respecting space rat — the class laughed at that. But Tai didn't mean God, didn't mean Allah; she meant the thing inside that made you human and that made you want to continue being human, continue being alive. "Soufflé" meant "spirituality," too, she said, the most important thing to remember. Strength and spirituality. She said when you opened up your visor, adrift who knows where and how far from the nearest ship, you had better find that thing, or you would be dead.

So when he had dared crank up his suit's visor after the *Wotan* had spaced him, Barker wondered for a moment if the view would destroy him, would drive him stark raving batfuck. The old space rats always talked about men and women driven mad by floating adrift, so crazy that when they got pulled in you had to lock them in port-less cabins until they could feel the hard earth beneath their feet. "Don't look down," the old rats would say, "if you drift away, opaque the visor and go to radar."

Only when Barker looked into absolute deep and beautiful space, he didn't go mad. In the all and utter beauty, Barker found that God that Tai had told him to find; he found it easily and magically. He found it in the totality of space, in the glory of the great beyond. In the soufflé. There were rats in the soufflé again. Temperature, water, resources, initiative, strength, attitude. And spirituality. It might be enough.

Only Tai hadn't warned him about finding his devil, too. He should have

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known — for every God there's a devil. When Barker got his suit stabilized, when he turned gently rolling around his long axis and a slight feeling of weight came back with the tap of the suit's thrusters, Barker found something beyond God. Floating at the same acceleration as the *Wotan* and still in its overall influence, even at a hundred klicks, he also felt the pull of some greater gravity, some other, greater mass.

Like 6789 Madeline Sue. His devil in the deep blue sea.

SIX-SEVEN-eight-nine Madeline Sue beckoned to him, the nearest natural object in his local universe. A bright little dot to the naked eye, on 200-magnification in his visor's scope he saw it as a pale gray blob, a potato with bumps and gouges. Dead center in his visor, Barker slowly came to understand the point of it all, the reason he had been shoved from the *Wotan* in a survival suit.

The *Wotan* moved toward 6789 Madeline Sue, on a fly-by scan. That information had not been his privilege to know before they had spaced him, but he quickly figured it out. It was no accident that he now moved slowly and steadily toward Madeline Sue, since the *Wotan* had moved slowly and steadily toward Madeline Sue, and despite being pushed whirling and flailing out the hatch, his forward momentum had not been dramatically changed. Head toward Jupiter, his feet toward the sun, Barker moved in a nearly straight vector, right smack dab on a collision course with 6789 Madeline Sue at a speed of 65,000 klicks an hour — or, as the space rats said, "puddle ass ramming speed."

Before he even thought his situation through, Barker had wondered if he would asphyxiate and die, his body to drift forever in space until some far-future freighter picked him up. No worry, he thought, contemplating 6789 Madeline Sue. At puddle ass ramming speed, he'd be lucky if they found an intact fingernail. "Turn your ass into a puddle," that's what the spacers meant. How big of a crater would he make in 6789 Madeline Sue, and how long would there be this little organic sheen?

Damn, he thought, that had been why the *Wotan* had risked letting him drift, fearing the evidence of his murder might be recovered. There would be no evidence. They had known — had *planned it*, those bastards Sims and Ryles — that he would hit 6789 Madeline Sue. Sonofabitch, they had decided

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to kill him that way.

At least it would be quick.

But why? As he drifted, the thought came to him, among rats and soufflés. Why? Why had he been spaced? What had he done? Barker was just a lowly envirotech, hired on at the last minute because the *Wotan*'s regular envirotech had had her papers pulled at Mir Station — something about failing to pay union dues, for which you got grounded six months. So the *Wotan* had hired him to do waste processing and someone named Hannah to do recycling maintenance. The regular envirotech had a double card in waste and recycling, but neither Barker nor Hannah did, though Hannah said she could do waste processing if need be, she just had let her card lapse for that. Hell, Barker had just finished the Basic Envirotech course two days before and gotten on the list. The regs said the *Wotan* had to have a waste processor and a recycling engineer, and single, double, or triple card, there had better be someone with the speciality aboard, or the *Wotan* didn't go, the union didn't let anything go, and the penalty for a ship pissing off the union wasn't suspension, it was seizure.

Barker remembered a whispered conversation the *Wotan*'s first mate had with the propulsion engineer. He and Hannah had been waiting in the first mate's office to get their signing okay. The *Wotan* was heading out on a freight run to a Godder colony at 7776 Linda Bird. The PE, Sims, had complained to the first mate, Ryles, that the added mass would screw up their insertion into the Linda Bird orbit. They had two hours to "jump or jive," as the saying went — go or wait — and the *Wotan* couldn't wait for another double card. The first mate said something to the PE and the PE nodded, asked Barker and Hannah their weight, and then whispered something back to the first mate, and he grinned and nodded. They were hired on the spot.

Only about two months out, it had been Ryles and Sims who had spaced him. Before they put him out the hatch, he heard Sims arguing with Ryles about who weighed more, him or Hannah. Barker thought Hannah had a few keys on him, but in the end it seemed to make no difference. Hannah, Sims, said, could do the shit and the maintenance, and Barker couldn't, so that was that: out the hatch.

Crap, Barker thought. Could that have been it? They needed to shuck mass? With all the freight aboard, with all the fuel, with vid discs and whore 'bots and any amount of excess tonnage, they'd space 250 kilos of man and

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Deimos suit just to save mass? He didn't believe it, wouldn't believe it, but there he was.

There were rats in the soufflé, again. The mnemonic came back once more. Temp, water, resources, soufflé, soufflé, soufflé. What different did it make? he thought. Why should he worry about survival when soon enough he'd be an organic sheen at the bottom of some newborn crater? Attitude, initiative, big holy fuck. He'd hit 6789 Madeline Sue and as near as he could tell, there didn't seem to be a damn thing he could do about it. Time, attitude, resources, strength, soufflé, soufflé. What could he do, blow his jets so he'd softly land on Madeline Sue? Do an insert into her puny orbit? Wunnerful: then he'd just float around it until he asphyxiated.

The thought of landing on the asteroid reminded him of a story he'd had to read for survival class, a little packet of what Tai called "scientific morality tales." It had been one of those "problem" stories about this guy off Vesta who had been marooned. Barker couldn't remember the setup, only that the guy had been in orbit around this rock and he had figured out if he vented a little air from his suit, the reaction would be enough to bring him down safely to the asteroid. The moral, Tai said, in case anyone had brains of cheese, was you were supposed to improvise if you wanted to save your sorry ass — or keep it from turning into a puddle.

Or a soufflé.

Rats, rats, yackety yack yack yack. Okay, he thought, let his subconscious tell him something. Work it out, just for fun, like Tai said. If you felt yourself going dingy, do chess problems, make up limericks, write sonnets, sip a snooze tab and zonk out for a day. Zooming down to Madeline Sue, at least five days until he went ker-splat, what the heck else could he do?

All right, he thought hours later, first you consider resources. He had one Deimos class survival suit, radiation hardened, with ten days food, water, and air. Okay, nine days, ten hours, some odd seconds: check. A vernier/thruster unit, with enough propellant for moving, if necessary, from someplace like Mir Station in low Earth orbit to a LaGrange Point, assuming he didn't mind holding his breath for the two-month trip. The dumb-computer, the BUM — Basically Unintelligent Machine — unit, of course, for serious number crunching. Inertial navigation systems, so he could tell where the hell he was, and backup helmet sextants and whatnot to confirm that. A comm unit to

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call all hail and help, as he had been for the whole livelong day, only he doubted anyone — save the bastards on the *Wotan* — would pick up his signal until well after pancake time. An emergency locator transmitter, ditto, pinging away every five minutes and not a response, either. And, of course, his incredible initiative and guts which, he knew, were absolutely necessary for life, survival, and personal redemption.

Sure.

But what the heck. . .

First: Could he slow enough to keep from slamming into 6789 Madeline Sue? Or, could he slow enough for an orbit, or — simpler still — just thrust enough out of the way to fly on by? Figure it out. Ask the dumb-BUM unit. Assume a given mass, calculate all the variables using fuel, air, oxygen, water, and recycling thereof by his environmental pack. He pulled his arms in back from the suit's waldoes and tucked them up inside the space in the chest cavity, poised before the keyboard of the dumb-BUM. Phrase it as a series of questions.

The *Wotan* — and he — were on a Hohmann transfer, a jump from Earth orbit to 6789 Madeline Sue's orbit. Or, actually, to the orbit of 7776 Linda Bird. Okay, so figure out how to move from the Earth-to -Linda Bird transfer into a 6789 Madeline Sue transfer.

For what? he asked himself. What was he thinking? Why move into orbit around 6789 Madeline Sue? How could that save him? Give him time? Okay, maybe. Maybe another ship would come by. He'd impact in five days, but an asteroid orbit would give him five more. But he'd done a scan already, hadn't seen squat except the *Wotan*, of course, and a robot freighter half an AU back ponderously moving out to the Belt. No chance. An orbit around 6789 Madeline Sue would only whirl him around and around until he —

Ah. Barker smiled. Ah. Around 6789 Madeline Sue, and on a different vector from whence he'd come. He began inputting commands. Establish several plans. Let the BUM do the thinking. Could he do a fly-by? How close? Where would it take him? The dumb-BUM gave him scenarios, little animated dramas flashed on the inside of his opaqued screen. A representation of a man whirling around a rock, in, back out, in graceful arcs with these curlicues of movement around 6789 Madeline Sue. He calculated the scenarios, then fudged around with recycling capabilities, thrust vectors, weight reduction, air-to-fuel manipulations, and finally, finally, he came up

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with something that might just work. He'd have to quit eating entirely, and cut water back to bare survival rations, sleep a lot, and not move around more than to breathe — no problem! — but it would work.

Barker allowed himself another smile as he drifted off to sleep again. It just might rats-in-the-soufflé work.

SIX-SEVEN-eight-nine Madeline Sue filled almost a quarter of the visor, a corner of the grid the BUM projected to confirm position. Right on target. Right on course, nine minutes to orbit. Barker ran the calculations through once more. Two minutes to go/no go. He had thought it through. With one option, he'd shoot the wad and take the safe course, the wise course — the current option. With the other option, he'd take the risky course, the daring course. One hundred seconds. It would be the last point to decide, the last point to change his mind. Beyond that, he was committed. A little light blipped: he could take a sip of water. He waited, mouth dry but not thirsty. After go, no go, then he'd sip. He'd set up the program so that he would have to decide at the last minute, have to consciously act.

Barker knew the feeling. He'd been on this precipice before. You dare or don't. You blow everything in one bold stroke. You move ahead and don't look back, just do it. Wasn't that just the way life worked, anyway? Not that "a road not taken" crap. A road was a road. You went down it and one road might be different than the other but they were still roads, still hard, still safe. No, this was different. This was jumping off a bridge and blowing up the bridge behind you. This was leaping out of an airplane and pulling the chute. This was Cortes burning his ships as he marched on Tenochtitlan, no way back to Spain and all the gold in Mexico his for the taking. This was blowing your life's savings for a one-way ticket up and out of the gravity well, so you could go into space, on anything, even a suck-ass freighter like the *Wotan*. This was daring to love, daring to risk, daring. . . daring to live or die trying to live — daring to kiss death in the face and plunge absolutely headlong into it all.

Yeah, he knew the feeling all right. It had been the story of his life.

The counter ticked away. Twenty seconds. Fifteen. Ten. Just like the way they always did it, from the first feeble rockets at Canaveral to this, a simple firing of a Deimos suit. Four, three, two — he reached out and placed

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his finger on the red button, and pushed — one.

No going back.

The verniers rolled him over, his visor screen fading to black as he turned and faced the sun. His back to 6789 Madeline Sue, the thrusters kicked in, the count flickering away on the visor. Forty-five seconds, all the propellant save one last blast, almost a gee of acceleration. He felt himself slowing, heavy again, and he swore he could feel the pull of Madeline Sue. The thrusters quit. He wished he could pull over and see the rock as he approached, see it for the pure joy of it, see its face close up as he orbited her, but the parameters didn't allow for that. He'd have to be content with the brief glimpse as he came around.

Around. That had been the trick, the sneaky little idea. That writer had it all wrong. You didn't crash into the rock, didn't set down gently on puffs of vented air. You did a slingshot around the rock, used the gravity of the asteroid to fling you out and away. As he came down to 6789 Madeline Sue, not toward it but around, not at puddle ass ramming speed, the rock whipped him toward it, one faint glimpse just before the rock turned, its horizon coming up and over and through. Just before he passed by, he blew the bolts that held the environmental pack to his chest, blew the two days remaining of water and air, blew an excess eleven kilos down onto 6789 Madeline Sue.

The bridge burned, that was it. Shucking the mass would give him increased velocity, both from the reaction of the lost mass and the extra acceleration gained because his thrusters had less to push out.

Out, that was the idea. Out. Out into space again, out back toward Earth, and then beyond, on a different vector and a different path, one that would take him whence he came, whence he had come from, whence he had first begun.

Back to the *Wotan.*

He'd been tracking the ship all along, watching its course, punching into the BUM its subtle shifts in direction. They had been tracking him, too, he knew, watching him, making sure that he would slam into 6789 Madeline Sue. And from their position, he knew they would think that.

The environmental pack slamming into the asteroid would trick them, make them believe he'd gone puddle ass. If another object came away, why, the *Wotan* would guess his impact had thrown up a chunk of Madeline Sue,

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or a chunk of himself. Hopefully, they wouldn't be too picky about the fact that a little chunk hit the asteroid and a big chunk flew away. Hopefully the enviro-pack and he would be blips on their screens and no more.

He had thought it out. There had been one plan, another plan, a real nasty plan that would have involved his slamming head first into the *Wotan*, fast enough — maybe — to do some damage, to take the ship out as he became a smear on their hull. A fly on the windshield, he liked to think of it. He could have done it, he knew, because he'd been nursing a good hate the whole last five days; it had even been the most logical, because even now as he headed toward a rendezvous with the *Wotan*, he didn't think he had a rat's ass of a chance, soufflé or not.

And yet, and yet. . . the chance remained.

The trick, he had seen in one of the scenarios the BUM had projected, the trick had been to match velocity with the *Wotan*. You could do it three ways. First, you could go for a direct hit, straight on, and hope that you would bump into the *Wotan* just slowly enough not to break any bones or bounce out and away. Second, you could intersect the ship at a perpendicular angle, and hope you didn't miss. Or, you could come up from behind, catch the ship and then decelerate quickly as you grabbed ahold — the "hobo hook," Tai called the maneuver, after railroad era vagrants who ran behind slowly moving trains and climbed aboard.

So as the gravity of 6789 Madeline Sue swung up and around, sucking away his momentum and at the same time giving some back, Barker saw the blip of the *Wotan* advancing to starboard and from below. A counter clicked away as the BUM program ran, tiny numbers flashing away on his visor. Again a countdown, and again he felt the Deimos suit thrusters kick him ahead—ahead into an insert from a 6789 Madeline Sue orbit into the *Wotan's* vector.

That would confuse them, he knew: a rock suddenly accelerating. He hoped they wouldn't notice the tiny jets on his suit, hoped they wouldn't consider the improbability of impact debris flying like a spacesuit.

The *Wotan* loomed ahead now, bow toward him and the stern thrusters pointed in the general direction of Jupiter, of 7776 Linda Bird. For a moment Barker panicked, thought he had gotten turned around and was coming head on. Then he sighed, relaxed: right, the *Wotan* had made its turnover and had

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done a deceleration burn a week before they had spaced him. That would be better, anyway: he would come up on the fuel tanks surrounding the ship, the hundred-meter-wide bladders that kept structural integrity by the pressure of the fluid within.

Five hundred meters, the numbers said. Coming up fast. The bow, the bridge bubble, slipped by, then the big midsection with the comm antennae, then more fuel bladders. He could see the numbers on the *Wotan's* side — T 1339 — the running lights, even dim portholes in the recreation lounge. He sped past the ship, moving closer down, and then it began to slide behind him. Thirty seconds to impact, coming down at an angle of forty-seven degrees. Barker slipped his arms back in the waldoes, armed the grappling lines. Fifteen seconds, down, down... The BUM fired a light burst from the verniers, and he slowed more, his angle a bit shallower. Down. Five seconds, then one more burst, and an aft fuel bladder enveloped him as he fired the grapples.

Gray membranes covered his face, as if he'd been slammed into some hideous pillow, and he rolled into the fluid with the slight shock of landing. He came up, sticky strings all wrapped around him, pawing for the light until he found his way out of the bladder skin. A faint stream of liquid oxygen crystallized around him, more ice popping up out of a tiny hole he'd torn in the bladder. The pressure from the fuel pushed the bladder back into shape, and the adhesive in the bladder skin fused it back together, the tension pushing him all the way to the surface.

He floated away, back out into space, and then Barker felt the tug of one of the grappling lines pull him back down. He fired another quick burst of the sticky lines, tied off in three places to the skin, and smiled.

"Yes," he whispered, then slightly louder, *"yes."*

He'd done it. It had worked. Rats in the soufflé, oh my. Barker took a sip from the tube in his helmet, sucked damp moisture and then empty air. Oh, yeah, he thought, smelling the stale air, too. A damn lot of good it would do to catch the *Wotan* only to suffocate.

Firmly attached, Barker looked up and down the *Wotan's* hull. Amidships would be access hatches, with more forward by the crew quarters. He looked aft, forward, opted for aft. Forward someone might see him, aft he'd be safer by the thrusters. That had been where they had spaced him, anyway, airlock fourteen. There would be spare enviropacks at any of the airlocks, maybe even internal systems jacks. He fired another grappling line aft, cut

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the ones restraining him, and so pulled himself back.

About fifty meters down, he came to a hatch. If they even suspected he had caught them, they'd lock the outside port. He palmed the hatch switch, smiled as it slid open. If they thought he could make it through the hatch, they would have brought in the enviropacks. Four enviropacks hung on racks just inside the airlock. Or, maybe they would just suck them dry. He checked the gauges, plugging one in, feeling the cool blast of fresh oxygen wash through his suit. All full. Barker smiled. Forty days, oh my. Lots of rats and soufflés.

If he made it inside, they would grab him and space him again. If he stayed inside the airlock, they could close the exterior door from the bridge, pressurize the lock, and then explosively blow it, sending him spinning away. Barker wriggled into an enviropack, tied the rest together with grappling line, and wrapped them to him. He'd wait outside.

If a cosmic storm came up, it would fry him. If he stayed outside for forty days, he might pick up enough rems for some serious radiation sickness. If he stayed in a pressure suit for any longer, he'd stink to high shit. Okay, he could handle the stink. Barker worked his way along the hull, to a little bump halfway up the long spidery skeleton connecting the thrusters to the main ship. Right, he remembered the *Wotan* had exterior shelters, the only way to survive cosmic storms if you got caught EVA and not near a lock. He pulled himself up to the little bump, pulled down the heavy lead door, got in, closed the door shut.

Barker settled into one of the seats inside and strapped himself in. His breath echoed in his helmet, deep gasps, and he sweated and stank and, Tai hadn't lied, you would reek of piss after a week in a Deimos suit, and he did, he did. But he was alive, he had done it, he had forty days of rations — more if he needed them by raiding another airlock. He had done it.

He smiled and felt his balls shiver the way they did when something went absolutely right, for once, or felt so good it made up for all the bad that had gone on. That feeling was like good chocolate, a real cup of coffee on a chilly fall morning with logs crackling in the fireplace, or a lover who let you please her and knew how to please you back.

Ten, maybe twenty days to 7776 Linda Bird. He patted the enviropacks on his suit.

Twenty days, he thought. I can wait. He'd stink like an overflowing

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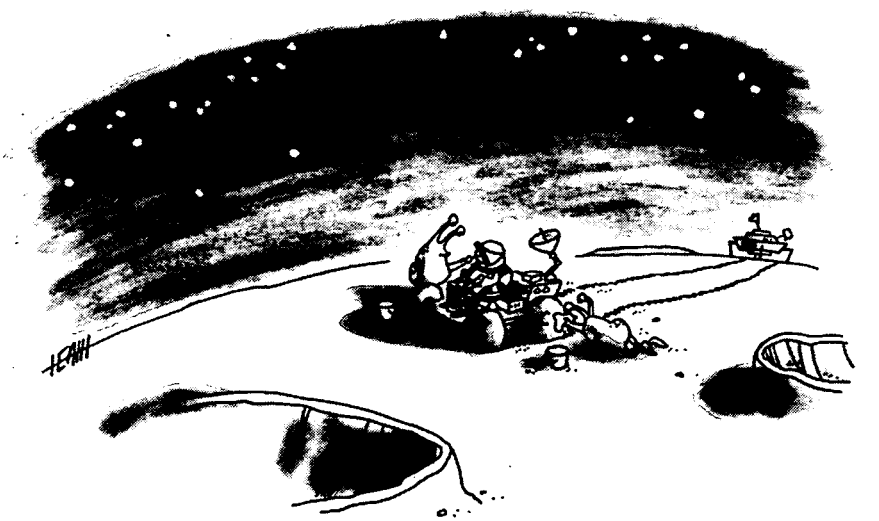
outhouse when he got out, but it would be worth it, worth it to float free of the *Wotan* as she docked at Linda Bird, worth it to see Sims' face as he walked down the gangplank to greet him.

It would be worth it, he thought, to stroll up to Ryles and the *Wotan* captain and tap them on the shoulder with his union card, Linda Bird security guards on either side, and demand the justice a space rat got when a ship let you drift away and made no effort to pick you up, *especially* if they spaced you in the first place. If a spacer lived to make his demand, the union law was simple and direct.

Barker would get the *Wotan*, cargo, crew, rats in the soufflé, and all.

FOR ISAAC ASIMOV



"That's a negative on the tip, Houston. My wallet's in my other suit."

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

TIME, AGAIN

AS WELL-evolved primates, we know a few things gut-deep and true: space and time. We can pace off a distance — the "foot" is a unit of measure — and we sense the passage of time. They're utterly different, of course.

The last century has dissolved such obliging certainties. The Newtonian worldview, with time ticked off by a rigid universal framework, ruled until the late nineteenth century. H.G. Wells, always a quick study, caught the shifting winds and made use of the new analogy which equated time with space — made it a fourth dimension, which a traveler could navigate.

Einstein shattered immutable time, combining space and time into a single continuum. The velocity of an observer served to rotate time into space, so that events which seemed simultaneous to one person would not look so to another who moved with a different speed. None of this was readily apparent to us, because we all move very much slower than light, which is the ultimate speed limit.

That limit separated two realms which could never interpenetrate, because approaching the barrier took ever-greater energy. Nothing precluded particles moving faster than light *if* they started out that way. The light barrier was weirdly symmetric, too. Particles moving infinitely fast have zero energy, just like particles weigh no velocity on our side of the barrier.

Einstein's theory allowed these eerie faster-than-light particles, as he himself knew. Nobody paid much attention to their theoretical possibility until the early 1960s, when

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Gerald Feinberg introduced the name "tachyons" — "fast ones" in Greek, whereas ordinary matter such as us is made of slow ones, "tardyons." Gerry died in 1992, and the last time I saw him he told me that the idea had appealed to him because of James Blish's story, "Beep." That tale concerns a faster-than-light communicator which works fine, except that the engineers can't eliminate a beep at the end of each message. It turns out that, stretched out, that beep contains all messages from all future times — because, as Blish knew, anything which travels faster than light can be used to send messages backward in time. Demonstrating this demands space-time diagrams, though you can see it qualitatively simply by noting that a tachyon covers more space than time in its trajectory, so in a sense it has a net debit in its favor — "time to burn."

I learned all this exotic stuff shortly after finishing my doctoral thesis in 1967. I was doing research at the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory and read recent papers on tachyons, among them Feinberg's. Several physicists had confronted directly a problem Gerry left for others — the familiar grandfather's paradox, which confuses cause and effect.

Most physicists believed then (and still do) that this paradox rules out tachyons or any other such backward-in-time trick. Some tried to maintain that tachyons could still exist, because as Richard Feynman pointed out, a particle traveling backward in time can be redefined as its own antiparticle (made of anti-matter) moving *forward* in time. This "reinterpretation principle" would set everything right, so that apparently anti-causal events would merely be reinterpreted by other observers as perfectly normal events.

This seemed to me to be a bold finesse from an empty hand. When this idea appeared in the scientific literature I discussed it with two friends and we wrote a quick paper refuting this view. Published in *Physical Review D* in 1970 (p. 263) under the title "The Tachyon Anti-Telephone" — see, even in dry old Phys Rev you can have fun with titles, if you try — it remains the only scientific paper I have written without a single equation in it.

We argued that notions like cause and effect could not be so easily made relative. The Feynman argument worked for one particle but not if you used two or more. With a minimum of two, whoever sent a signal could sign it, clearly establishing the origin.

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We regarded the whole thing as rather amusing, so we discussed an example in which Shakespeare sends his newest work backward to Francis Bacon. At the time Bacon was a leading contender for the "true" Shakespeare among those who thought that a mere country boy could not have penned such masterpieces. (This controversy I have always found even more weird than time travel, culminating in a paper I once read that earnestly contended that the plays were not written by Will Shakespeare, but rather by another man of the same name.) "If Shakespeare types out *Hamlet* on his tachyon transmitter, Bacon receives the transmission at some earlier time. But no amount of reinterpretation will make Bacon the author of *Hamlet*. It is Shakespeare, not Bacon, who exercises control over the content of the message."

He can simply sign it, after all. Behind all the mathematics in the earlier papers lurked this simple, fatal idea.

Still, I rather liked tachyons. My two coauthors were David Book and William Newcomb. Newcomb was the grandson of the famous Simon Newcomb, an astronomer who wrote the infamous paper showing why airplanes could not fly. When he happened to mention this over a beer, alarm bells went off. Was I signing onto a similar blinkered perspective, to be cited with ridicule generations later?

So I mulled the matter over, with one eye cocked at the steady stream of papers about time. I was urged on by a report from Australia in 1972 that two experimenters had observed a tachyon. Their particle detectors, carried aloft in a balloon to catch cosmic rays, had found that a single event occurred at about 2.5 times light speed. I read their paper with astonishment. Dozens of papers followed, proposing theories for tachyons. Other experimenters tried to duplicate the Australian results — and failed. In the twenty years since, nobody has seen any such event, and statistically they should have. The Australian data was probably wrong.

Still, I wondered how tachyons — which Einstein's special theory of relativity clearly allowed — could fit into the world as we knew it. Over five years I wrote a novel, *Timescape*, exploring the simplest situation I could imagine — discovery of tachyons, and the first attempts to probe their properties and use. Rather than the convenient Wellsian traveler, I used scientists as I knew them, warts and all, doing what they would —

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trying to use the new discovery to communicate something they cared about.

But how to deal with the paradox? I had always rather liked another theory which resolved the multiple-outcome property of conventional quantum mechanics. This interpretation of quantum events supposes that when a given particle, say, passes through a hole in a wall, it can go in several directions. The wavelike property of matter says that the same experiment, repeated many times, will give a pattern of impacts on a far screen. The density of impacts corresponds to the *probability* that a single particle would follow that trajectory and make that impression. But a single particle's trajectory can't be predicted precisely — we can only get the probability distribution.

Enter a fresh new view, due to Hugh Everett of Princeton in the 1950s. Everett said that all the possible outcomes predicted by the probability analysis of quantum mechanics *are separately real.* This means that every time a particle passes through a hole, the entire universe splits into many possible outcomes.

Envision separable worlds peeling off from every microscopic event. In our world, the particle smacks into the wall and that specific outcome defines our world forever more. Other worlds simultaneously appear, with a slightly different impact point. Every event generates great handfuls of other worlds — a cosmic plenitude of astronomical extravagance. I've often wondered whether Everett was influenced by such sf stories as Murray Leinster's "Sidewise in Time" (1934).

The Everett view was fun to think about, and logically defensible, but nobody really believed it. But I found it handy. (Writers are magpies.) I said in my novel that the Everett interpretation didn't really apply to *every* event. Instead I reserved the Everett picture for only those events which produced a causal paradox. If a physicist sent a tachyon backward in time and it had no grandfather-killing effects, no problem. If it did, though, then the universe split into as many versions as it took to cover all the possibilities. So you could indeed send some grandfather-killing message (or anything else that made a paradox), and grandfather would die. But not in the universe you were doomed to inhabit. Instead, another universe appeared, unknown to you, in which dear old grandfather died, alas, and you never happened at all. No paradox, since

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the tachyon which killed gramps came from another universe, from another you.

This seemed nifty enough to furnish a solution to my novel, but I did not take it seriously enough to actually work up a formal quantum field theory. I published the novel and was astonished at its success. It has been cited in several books about causal problems and even some scientific papers. Quite pleasant for a hard sf writer.

Meanwhile, the problem of time continued. Einstein's special relativity applies to regions of space-time which are "flat" in the sense that gravity is not significant. Except for introducing the finite speed of light, the theory feels Newtonian. George Bernard Shaw, in a tongue-in-cheek toast to Einstein, put it this way: "Newton was able to combine a prodigious mental faculty with the credulities and delusions that would disgrace a rabbit. As an Englishman, he postulated a rectilinear universe because the English always use the word 'square' to denote honesty, truthfulness, in short: rectitude."

Einstein's general theory stitches together small regions of locally flat space-time into a quilt of truly warped structure. Powerfully curved space-time plays hob with causality. One of Einstein's close friends, Kurt Gödel, produced a model (from Einstein's field theory) for a universe which spins so fast that time and space get radically twisted. Zipping around such a universe can return you to the place and time of your departure. The mathematics, coming from the famous author of Gödel's Proof in mathematical logic, was impeccable.

Could this happen? Many hoped not. With a sigh of relief they noted that there is no evidence that our universe rotates. So Gödel's case simply doesn't apply here.

But then in the 1960s several theorists showed that local rotation of stressed space-time near black holes could do similar tricks. Spin a black hole fast enough and the rotation offsets the gravitational attraction, effectively stripping the guts of the hole bare. The bowels of the beast are not pretty.

It contains regions of *negative* space-time. From such regions a traveler could do as Wells did, slipping backward in time. Worse, he might reach a *naked singularity*, where all physical things (mass density, gravitational attraction) became indefinitely large.

Mathematics cannot handle singularities, so mathematicians would rather that they be decently

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clothed. No one has been able to produce suitable garments except by the lo-and-behold method. When I last discussed this with Stephen Hawking, in 1989, he admitted that he suspected that we could merely invoke the clothing of singularities as a rule, beyond proof.

Of course, he pointed out, to explain why we don't see time travelers as everyday visitors, notice the requirements. To make a reasonable time machine with a rotating black hole would take just about the mass of a small galaxy. I got interested in the center of our own galaxy then, and have been amused to note that observations now suggest that a black hole of about a million solar masses does indeed lurk there. If so, it might make a decent enough time machine, if it rotates. The tidal forces near such a hole would not tear you apart as you zoomed by it. This is true, even if the no-singularity rule in fact is a law of our universe.

This situation wasn't good enough for Frank Tipler, a maverick physicist at Tulane University. I had disputed Tipler's rather conservative objections to the possibility of intelligent, technological aliens in the scientific literature, so I was surprised to find that he embraced a truly radical solution to Einstein's equations. He had discovered in 1974 another solution which envisioned a rotating cylinder. Now, this cylinder had to be indefinitely long and be made of matter as dense as a neutron star. Still, in principle one might assemble such an object and spin it so that its surface moved at a quarter of light speed.

If one did, space-time would wrap around the cylinder in alternating layers of positive and negative sense. Corkscrewing a spaceship through these just right would send it backward in time. Ah, but maybe physics would make such a machine impossible because the cylinder has to be very long. Unless it's genuinely infinite, it will collapse in a finite time under its own gravitational attraction. With a sigh of relief, physicists forgot about Tipler's barber-pole space-times.

In the late 1980s a group at Caltech began to mull over a different approach. Never mind Einstein's gravitational theory standing alone — suppose we had a theory combining it with the other great theory of our age, quantum mechanics? This synthesis had been tried, with only fair progress.

Kip Thorne at Caltech wondered if something in a quantum relativity theory would rule out time machines

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forever. As usual, such a theory has to be patched together with methods which work in simpler, limiting cases — near-flat space-times and objects not too small.

In the quantum world, there is no true vacuum. Instead, what looks to the ordinary eye like nothing at all is instead a seethe of particles winking on and off, a kind of space-time foam which spawns matter and takes it away at bewildering speed. From all this hyperactive froth can pop a tunnel in space-time itself — a "wormhole." It will go away immediately, unless one does something to shore it up. Placing two metal sheets very close together will do the job, making a kind of electrical capacitor which amplifies the energy available to the wormhole. Pushing the plates exquisitely close together attaches a mouth of the wormhole to each plate. These two mouths are, in the internal terms of the wormhole, actually the same place. A particle pushed into one appears instantly at the other end.

Once made, a wormhole can be engineered into a time machine. Using Einstein's ideas from special relativity, an engineer can whiz one plate away at nearly light speed. By the usual "twin paradox," the traveling plate will experience time moving rather more slowly than the plate which stays at home, just as do the twins in Robert Heinlein's *Time for the Stars.* (Rather unsurprisingly, as a twin I found this one of his best "young adult" novels.) Bringing the wandering plate back home gives the engineer a wormhole whose mouths are separated now in both space and time — in principle, as big a time separation as we like. Throw a message into the slow-twin mouth and it comes out the other mouth before it was sent.

Still, even this machine is astronomically pricey. Take a solar system's entire metal, spread it out into thin plates the size of the system. You must flatten them with maddening accuracy, so that you can then smack them to within an atom's width of each other. Inside this infinitesimally thin sandwich, there could be enough energy density to pluck a wormhole out of the bountiful vacuum. If so, the time machine would presumably work.

A tall order, but probably easier than making Tipler's cylinder or taking up a collection for a galactic black hole. So we now have several ideas of how to make such a machine, though we can't afford one right now. But why should this matter? If a time machine is ever built, in principle we

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should be receiving visitors now. Yet we haven't seen any. Why?

An adroit answer provided by Larry Niven supposes that there is nothing at all illogical about time travel, but we must remember that causality still works going forward in time. Every paradox-producing message or traveler sent back will change the conditions back at the origin of the time machine. Remember Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder," in which a dinosaur-hunting expedition bagged its quarry, but accidentally trampled a butterfly with a boot — a striking image. They returned to find the politics and language of their era had shifted.

Imagine that people keep using such a time machine until an equilibrium sets in between past changes and future reactions. The simplest steady-state in which no changes occur is one in which no time machine exists any longer. Events conspire — say, science falls forever into disfavor, or humanity dies out — to make the time machine erase itself.

This "Niven's Law" follows directly from a basic picture from wave mechanics. Suppose time signals behave like waves. Looping into the past and back to the future, a wave can interfere with itself. Picture ocean waves intersecting, making chop and froth as they cancel here, reinforce there.

Quantum mechanically, even particles can act like waves, so it makes sense to speak of time loops as channels for the propagation of waves of probability. The wave amplitude gives the probability that a particle will be. A loop which brings a wave back to exactly cancel itself means that the entire process cannot occur — probability zero at the very beginning, where the trip starts.

This picture actually comes from the history of quantum mechanics. One can predict the energy levels of hydrogen by thinking of its electron as a wave propagating around a circle, its orbit. Only certain wavelengths of the wave will fit on the orbital circumference. This quantizing condition yields the values of energy the electron must have.

Physicists have used such pictures in many other problems. John Wheeler and Richard Feynman based a theory of electrodynamics on it, assuming that electromagnetic waves travel both into the past and into the future — since both solutions emerge from the basic equations, discovered by James Clerk Maxwell. They explained why we only see the "forward" wave (ordinary light) by invoking something in the past which

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absorbs all the backward waves.

Perhaps the limitless density of matter at the big-bang origin of the universe does this. I always found this picture bizarre but hard to disprove. Part of my puzzlement came from that mysterious absorber back there, always working to make this world look straightforward.

Yet considerable theories have been constructed on such foundations. John Cramer, science columnist for *Analog* though better known as a physicist at the University of Washington, devised a new way of viewing quantum mechanics. Called the "transactional interpretation," it says that every quantum interaction involves a pair of signals, backward and forward in time, making a "handshake" between past and future. If quantum mechanics is linear (a technical term implying a certain mathematical tidiness), then all of the backward-in-time aspects of the transaction get neatly erased, blocking any possibility of communication.

But if, as Nobel Laureate Steven Weinberg has suggested, quantum mechanics contains even a tiny nonlinear component, then the erasure is incomplete and a trans-time communicator is possible. Some theorists have come forward with schemes to build such a device. It might even be fairly cheap, made out of lasers, optical filters, and other easily acquired gear. No exotic matter, enormous energies, or the rest.

Still, these methods of ruling out time machines make me a bit uneasy because they want to have it both ways. Sure, time travel is easy, they say — with Wheeler-Feynman, every single light ray has its time-traveling twin. It's just that events always conspire to make the wave functions interfere, preventing any logical paradoxes.

One doesn't have to be paranoid to feel that such a contrived universe is too neat a conspiracy. Cramer's model may allow us to lift the curtain a bit, peeking at the complicated apparatus which makes our seemingly simple world work.

This interest in quantum effects as the key to time travel is a welcome change from the gargantuan gravity machines I've already mentioned. In *Timescape* I tried to solve the paradoxes by combining special relativity (tachyons) and quantum mechanics. Then physics fashion in time machines had shifted to general relativity (Tipler machines, as used by Poul Anderson in *The Avatar*), and then to quantum mechanics (wormholes, Cramer's transactions). What

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about uniting general relativity and quantum mechanics — a "theory of everything"?

Imagine my surprise when I came upon a paper in *Physical Review D*, where our tachyon paper had appeared, in November of 1992. Titled somewhat forbiddingly "Quantum Mechanics Near Closed Timelike Lines," it constructs a theory for effects in highly curved space-time which contains causal loops — "closed timeline lines," in the jargon. It was written by David Deutsch, who has been studying these matters for a decade at Oxford (not Cambridge, as in *Timescape*).

"Contrary to what has usually been assumed," Deutsch says, "there is no reason in what we know of fundamental physics why closed timelike lines should not exist." In twenty pages of quantum logic calculations, he shows that no obstacle to free will or even grandfather murder really exists.

It's all done with the Everett Interpretation. In quantum cosmology there is no single history of space-time. Instead, all possible histories happen simultaneously. For the vast preponderance of cases, this doesn't matter — the ontological bloat of an infinitude of worlds has no observable consequences. It's just a way of talking about quantum mechanics.

Not so for time machines. Then a quantum description *requires* a set of "classical" (ordinary) space-times which are similar to each other — except in the important history of the paradox-loop. The causal loop links all the multiple histories.

Think of unending sheets stacked on end and next to each other, like the pages in this magazine. Timelines flow up them. A causal loop snakes through these sheets, so the parallel universes become one. If the grandson goes back in time, he crosses to another time-sheet. There he shoots granddad, and lives thereafter in that universe. His granddad lived as before and had grandchildren, one of whom disappears, period.

Quantum mechanics always furnishes as many linked universes as there would be conflicting outcomes; it's quite economical. In this view, "it is only ever an approximation to speak of things happening 'in a universe.' In reality the 'universes' form part of a larger object...which, according to quantum theory, is the real arena in which things happen." Cosmic stuff, indeed.

Just now, writing this column three months after Deutsch's paper appeared, I opened *Timescape* and

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tracked down my old thinking. "When a loop was set up, the universe split into two new universes... The grandson reappeared in a second universe, having traveled back in time, where he shot his grandfather and lived out his life, passing through the years which were forever altered by his act. No one in either universe thought the world was paradoxical."

I framed my fictional theory this way because it seemed at least a plausible escape hatch from the genuine problems of time machines, using quantum logic. But my deeper motivation was to capture the eerie sense of having altered the past, the age-old dream...but for someone else.

Such an act is the ultimate altruism: you cannot then benefit whatever from usefully adjusting the past (or suffer, either). Someone exactly like you does benefit (yes, a twin) — but you will never see them, and cannot know this fact except in theory. Most of all, I was struck in writing the closing pages of the novel with that glimpse of vistas unknown, whole universes beyond our grasp, times untouched.

It was quite strange to read these neatly couched arguments in *Physical Review D*. There is a certain wrenching sensation in having anticipated the qualitative aspects — not the thickets of equations; Deutsch's quantum logic calculations I find quite daunting — of a theory which seems to open the way to actual use of time machines, if we should ever devise them.

Will we? Perhaps, in time.

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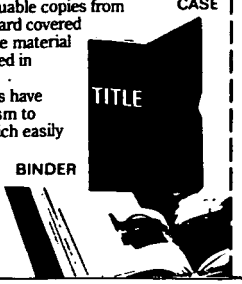

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Last summer, Dale Bailey attended the Clarion Writers Workshop in East Lansing, Michigan. It proved to be a turning point in his writing career. Since then, he has sold four short stories, all to F&SF. "Eidelman's Machine," written at Clarion, is the first to see print.

Eidelman's Machine

By Dale Bailey

EIDELMAN IS OBSESSED, a remarkable development in a life as otherwise placid and unremarkable as a broad gentle river. It occurred suddenly, this obsession, just this morning, and already it has had a noticeable impact on his life.

Eidelman now stands, stony faced as a statue, in the midst of a slowly expanding puddle of Mountain Dew. At the edge of the pool lies an overturned handtruck. Twenty or so two-liter plastic bottles are scattered about, ruptured, greenish contents seeping into the growing pool. Though Eidelman is aware of this, he does not care; he is caught up in his obsession.

When Mike, the assistant manager of the A&P where Eidelman works, where Eidelman has worked for almost ten years, taps him on the shoulder, Eidelman responds visibly, shaking off his obsession as a dog might shake off

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water.

Eidelman stares into Mike's wide simple face, lightly freckled. Shoppers cruise by, guiding buggies about the sticky pool and trying without success to appear uninterested. "Listen," says Mike, "why don't you take an early lunch? You feel okay?"

"Fine," says Eidelman. "I feel fine."

"Why don't you go ahead and eat?"

"Okay." Eidelman shrugs and walks away without even making an effort to avoid the Mountain Dew. He is a big man, thirtyish, soft without being fat. Light brown hair falls lifelessly across his forehead. He is not ugly or handsome or even average. His features have an unfinished look about them, like putty, like the features of a sculpture abandoned just as it begins to take shape. Jeans sag around his bottom and his shoes make smacking sounds, like sloppy kisses, as he crosses the dry tile to the stairs up to the lounge. He is unaware of the stares that follow him: Mike, standing at the edge of the pool of Mountain Dew, looking on in puzzlement; Cindy, behind her register, eyes narrow with concern.

Eidelman finds no respite in the lounge. He briefly considers the series of accidents that has plagued him today: an overturned display of Krispy Kreme doughnuts, a smashed loaf of bread, a broken jar of pickles. Uncharacteristic mistakes, these are, for Eidelman is conscientious, careful. It is his nature.

Obsession, however unarguable, however unassailable, is not characteristic. But the fact remains, he is obsessed, has been since he woke in that pale light before dawn, the nature of the machine, its design and its function, as clear in his mind as his knowledge of his own identity. He lay there for a while, staring out the open window at tree limbs, black against the graying sky, considering this responsibility which had fallen to him without his will or permission, wondering how it would change his life.

Now, in the lounge, Eidelman contemplates the microwave oven and wonders how its unique components might fit into the machine. He is insensible of the rank odor of the garbage he has forgotten to take out that morning, of the incessant buzz of a dying fluorescent light, of the quiet chortle of the percolator.

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When Cindy speaks, he is startled. He glances at her, standing just within the doorway, arms tucked in the pockets of her cashier's smock, head cocked quizzically as she studies Eidelman studying the microwave. Her features are pleasant if plain; she has dark bobbed hair. Her eyes are green as new grass. She does not smile. Her teeth are the color of old bones, crooked in the coffin, and though Eidelman has heard her tell another cashier that she is saving to have them straightened and bleached, he has never seen her smile.

It doesn't bother him. He knows how long it takes to save when you work in a grocery store.

"I'm sorry?" Eidelman asks. His voice cracks hesitantly, as if he hasn't spoken much in his life, and he hasn't. He has hardly ever spoken to Cindy.

Cindy smiles uncertainly. "I said, are you okay?"

Before he can speak, she is across the room, cool hand against his forehead.

"You don't feel hot," Cindy announces, pursing her lips. "You are okay, aren't you?"

"I don't really feel so good." He meets her eyes for a moment and looks away. He has developed a sudden interest in the fly-littered fluorescent squares set into the tiled ceiling.

Cindy nods. "I thought so. That's what I told Mike. He said if you want you could go home, since we aren't busy."

"Okay. Thanks. I guess I will."

"I hope you get to feeling better." Cindy turns to go.

Just when she is at the head of the stairs, Eidelman speaks again. "Cindy. Be careful tomorrow. Because of the earthquake."

"Eidelman, there's not going to be an earthquake. Everyone knows that."

"Oh," says Eidelman.

He hopes so. He fervently hopes so.

EIDELMAN WALKS home along the sidewalks of Stowes Corners, Missouri, beneath arching canopies of maple and oak, through the stillness of a small town morning. Cars occasionally whisk by with the sounds of dry leaves

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blowing, dogs bark, but otherwise the morning is silent. There might be nothing in the world but Eidelman and this sun-dappled street. Nothing at all. That doesn't bother Eidelman. He knows silence, knows stillness. His is a life circumscribed by silence and absence: the father who left when Eidelman was nine, not returning; the mother who died when he was twenty-four.

Now the machine furnishes the void. Mingled fear and excitement, hot as current, jolt through him. He does not want to consider the possibility of failure.

Eidelman has heard the predictions. Everyone in Stowes Corners has, probably everyone in Missouri. Not that anyone believes it. It is easy to scoff, especially when one considers that Dr. Bernham's prediction coincides with the publication of his popular study of the recent earthquake in Los Angeles — an earthquake he did not predict. Especially when one considers that Bernham has garnered his book to-die-for publicity on the morning talk shows. Especially when one considers the prediction in all its ludicrous specificity. According to Jake Bernham, at precisely 5:00 A.M. on Wednesday, March 23rd, the earth directly beneath Stowes Corners will shudder into new alignments.

When the prediction became news, the people of Stowes Corners chuckled and went about their lives. So did Eidelman.

Until last night. Until the dream.

In the dream, Eidelman stands on the porch of the scabrous old house his mother left him. The day is brilliant with light. Across the yard, at the gate, Eidelman sees Cindy in her cashier's smock. Sunlight gleams against her hair. Her plain features are animated with joy. She is smiling and her teeth are white.

Eidelman steps down to the cracked weedy sidewalk to greet her. The earth surges beneath him like a sheet snapped out in still air, like ripples fleeing a stone dropped in placid water. He feels as if the land has pulled free of anchors. Behind him, he hears the house crumbling in on itself, joists popping with the gunshot cracks of snapped tendons, rafters splintering, plaster crumbling into the basement with the rattle of dry corn husks in a wind-blown field. In the dream, Eidelman can hear this, is conscious of it on

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some level, but it is as distant and unimportant as the hum of cars along a busy street.

His attention is riveted on Cindy, on the vast rift which is opening up in the earth between them. The sidewalk before Cindy slides into the earth's maw, and she is falling, fingers scrabbling at the shifting earth, mouth wide in a scream which has no sound, eyes bulging. Cindy, falling away before him, as he steps toward her, arms outstretched, fighting to maintain his balance against the crazily dipping earth. The cracked sidewalk heaves beneath Eidelman, throwing him to the ground. He hears a sound like a hundred slamming doors and the earth shudders to a halt. Eidelman stands up.

The rift is closed. He stands alone in the middle of an arid desolate plain where nothing grows.

When he wakes, Eidelman sees the machine, etched in glowing lines against the dark ceiling. He knows he can build it.

Knows that he has to.

THE HOUSE Eidelman's mother left him is located on a broad tree-shaded street behind a weathered picket fence. Nearly a hundred years old, the house is drifting inexorably to ruin. Dormers stare like blind eyes from beneath heavy slate brows. Battered gutters creak in the spring wind. Inside, stale air hangs in doorways. Hinges rust. Ceilings loom thirteen feet above, sloughing paint like dry flesh. Footsteps—Eidelman's alone—ring hollow against hardwood floors, once his mother's polished joy, now scuffed. Eidelman tries to keep the house in order—the threadbare carpet is clean, the old appliances in the kitchen spotless—but there is about it an antique faded air, like a sepia-toned photograph. He has neither the money nor the time to keep it as his mother kept it after his father left, when the house was a boarding house, rich with laughter and company.

Eidelman moves purposefully about the house, through golden sunlight slanting through blinds, through shadow and stagnant air, gathering to himself the things his parents have left. Eidelman opens doors that have remained shut for years, probes in closets and beneath stairs, through old guest rooms with their iron bedframes and porcelain washbasins. Hinges

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shriek. Sounds clatter and bump along stairs as Eidelman collects components for the machine, lugging them through the vast silent rooms to the airy gallery, once a common room, which runs the eastern length of the house.

From his mother's room Eidelman takes a radio and a portable television, ignoring the teeth placed at the bottom of a glass six years ago. He collects his mother's old Singer sewing machine from the card table where it has rested for decades, leaving a ghostly outline in the patina of dust. He wrestles the old air conditioner from his mother's window, remembering how he bought it that summer when she grew sick and was never cool enough. He accumulates other items: vacuum cleaners, an ancient buffer, stereo components and speakers, lamps, three or four fans. In the kitchen, he finds a toaster, a blender, an electric carving knife, and an old microwave. Briefly, he considers emptying the refrigerator and dragging it along, but it's too much trouble. He thinks he can manage without it.

He also collects what he can of his father's — those few odds and ends which have lingered about the house for decades, presences which remind him of absence. A hundred times, Eidelman has studied these remnants, the detritus of his father's life, seeking in them some indication of character, some motive for abandonment. When he was ten, Eidelman emptied his father's electric razor of collected stubble, scraping the tiny shards of hair into an aspirin bottle which he carried like a talisman for years. Now Eidelman pockets the razor without thought. In the back of his old bureau drawer, hidden away where he placed them years ago, Eidelman finds his father's rusty Swiss Army knife and an old Timex, frozen perpetually at 5:01. Nothing else remains. For a long moment, he sits on the edge of his tiny bed — identical to those in the guest rooms — and examines the knife, wondering what purpose it might serve, if any. Finally, he shrugs and brings it along, tucking it into a pocket as he descends the stairs.

Outside, in the shed, Eidelman gathers those things he should associate with his father but cannot: three lawn mowers, two of which haven't worked in years; a weed eater; a chain saw; electric hedge trimmers. He also takes the toolbox which had once been his father's. Eidelman has handled it a hundred times in his youth. His fingers know its planes and surfaces, its sharp angles. No vestige of his father remains.

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In the dim afternoon light of the eastern gallery, Eidelman caresses the toolbox. Latches spring open. The lid rises with oiled precision. Gleaming rows of polished tools, aligned neatly in separate compartments, meet his eyes.

Eidelman inspects the room. He has pushed the furniture against the eastern wall, beneath wide windows. A broad space runs down the center of the gallery, thickly cluttered with machinery. It looks as if Eidelman has robbed an appliance store. A tiny smile touches his lips and his fingers move to the tools.

Eidelman fancies himself a mechanic.

Night falls, swathing Stowes Corners in darkness. Eidelman pauses long enough to switch on the overhead light and eat a sandwich. He stands in the doorway to the kitchen, surveying the eastern gallery as he eats.

The room is strewn with disassembled appliances. Televisions, rear panels removed, disgorge picture tubes and colored wires. Disemboweled speaker cabinets lie nearby, tumbled on their sides, trailing speakers and wires like tangled viscera. From where he stands, Eidelman can see the tiny gears and cogs of his father's watch, arranged carefully on a paper towel. He can see vacuum tubes and drive belts, empty light sockets and spark plugs, heating elements and copper tubing. Everything he needs.

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BY MIDNIGHT, the machine has begun to take shape, as long as the room, shoulder high, filling the entire eastern gallery. It is a jumble of indecipherable technology, arcane to any eye but Eidelman's.

He works steadily as the hours pass, fingers flying dexterously as he moves about the room, wiring this, hammering that, fitting fan blades atop towering posts, pausing for a moment to consider the next step, and then moving on, on. As morning approaches, Eidelman wires in heavy bass speakers, bracketing them securely to the hardwood floor.

Through the windows lining the eastern wall, Eidelman sees gray appear at the horizon, stitching the earth to the eastern sky. It is nearing 5:00 a.m. Eidelman works frantically. The earth tenses beneath his feet as he hurriedly bolts a light socket atop the machine, wiring it down through an intricate network of steel and aluminum and glass, to a Huffy lawn mower engine buried in a labyrinth of heterogeneous components.

4:56 A.M. Eidelman screws a one-hundred watt light bulb into the socket.

4:57 A.M. Eidelman strides purposefully about, testing connections, searching for anything amiss. Outside the windows, the sky has grown still lighter. Lights gleam from neighboring houses. Eidelman cannot help but imagine the people who live in them, standing in doorways, disbelieving,

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refusing to believe, but unwilling to take chances.

4:58 A.M. He sees it. A vital connection not made, a wire hanging loose where he has failed to anchor a screw flush against the surface of the machine. Eidelman reaches to his rear pocket, fingers probing for a screwdriver which is not there. He has laid it down across the room, atop an end table pushed flat against the wall. Eidelman glances at his digital watch, but there is no time.

Outside the night has fallen silent. Even the crickets are quiet. Eidelman can feel the earth gather beneath him, tensing. Perhaps there is a hint of a shudder. He is not certain.

Eidelman remembers his father's Swiss Army knife.

4:59 A.M. Eidelman fumbles the knife out of his pocket, fingers prying the rusty screwdriver blade free. Blood hammering in his ears, he fits it into the screw, tucking the loose wire beneath it, twisting, twisting, twisting until the blade snaps and the screw is flush and tight.

He dives across the room, flipping on the machine even as the numbers on his watch metamorphose to 5:00 A.M. The machine sputters to life, sucking juice along the umbilical snaking from the socket on the eastern wall. Through the windows, Eidelman notices the neighbors' lights dim perceptibly, and he imagines them, disbelieving but bracing themselves anyway, unaware that he, Eidelman, has worked through the night in hopes of saving them all.

The machine hums and rattles. Fans spin. Coolant surges through the lines. Light bulbs light. The eyes of Eidelman's mother's stove, placed equidistantly along the top of the machine, glare red at the ceiling. Bass speakers begin to pound. The floor shakes and the windows rattle against their sills. For a moment, Eidelman fears that the machine has failed — that he has failed — that people all across Stowes Corners are dying, that Cindy, even at this moment, is sliding helplessly into the pit, walls rumbling shut about her.

But it is only the pounding bass, surging through the old house, vibrating through the floor, along joists and rafters, down through the cellar and into the earth below.

Vibrations surge through the house and into the tensing earth, soothing

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harmonies from Eidelman's machine.

It is 5:01 A.M.

The earth does not shake.

Later that morning, outside the A&P, Eidelman crouches before a newspaper machine, scanning the headline of the *Stowes Corners Banner*:

BERNHAM DISPROVED!
All's Well in Stowes Corners!

Eidelman stands up. He does not buy the paper.

Inside, Mike smiles and asks if he is feeling better.

"Much better," Eidelman replies. "Much better."

And then he sees Cindy, standing patiently before her register. She turns to greet him and, though he can neither quantify nor explain it, something akin to joy surges through Eidelman — as if he has been falling all this time from an airplane, so high that he can see the curving horizon, and at last the parachute has snapped open, dragging him back and up as it blooms in the cold air above him, straps tightening beneath his arms and around his shoulders, and then he is suspended, floating, and below him the world resolves itself at last into a patchwork geometry of order.

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Robert Frazier last appeared in F&SF *in our April, 1991, issue. Since then, his book of collaborative and solo poetry,* Chronicles of the Mutant Rain Forest *by Robert Frazier and Bruce Boston, has been published by Horror's Head Press.*

Bob first wrote "Night Vision" as a 20 page poem. It's a companion to the story "Homing Instinct" which appeared in Amazing Stories *in 1988. The stories came about after he read "true yet bizarre accounts of the Deep South, like the Marksville rain of fishes."*

Night Vision

By Robert Frazier

BACK THEN I PREFERRED MY unembellished name, William Ivan Parti, but the war veterans I poached with taunted me with "Willy Peter," for my skin looked unnaturally pale, white as the phosphorous incendiary they'd used to fry natives in Guatemala or the Philippines, or, if they went as far back as Pops Boudreau, the 'Nam. I was younger than they. I let them have their fun. "Hey, Willy Pete, you give a man the stoned creeps with that face." Or..."Don't hang it over the side to piss, the muddogs love white meat." The stuff echoed in my head, like the inflected voice of my Uncle Louis, but I chalked it up to mere machismo and banter. I guess I accepted the nickname as a metaphor for what I considered my clean, near-virginal soul. And though these poachers were my friends, I came to realize that Pops, that wizened little no-shit Cajun, actually believed I was too visible to the 'gators and mutated creatures we called muddogs, that he believed I glowed like some ghostly warning sign where the camouflage paint thinned around my eyes and mouth, and wore down to the love lines in my palms.

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He said he knew about me, called me a Soldier's Jinx. The fated kind that could spoil their luck at illegal hunting and get them five to ten in the Opelousas pen. I hadn't fought long enough in the latest war, the Persian Gulf, to get behind such superstitious crap, but I'd lived on this blackwater bayou all my youth.

This was Creole country that spoke of mystery: New Iberia. Smoke Bend. Bearwalker Lake. Lake Caillou. Bayou Windigo. Bayou Loup-Garoux. Vermilion Bay. Lord, that was enough.

Saturday nights we'd meet at Queen Ida's, a ramshackle general store raised on a boat dock that ran out into a deep cove on the outskirts of Cognizant, Louisiana. Ida's was the kind of place where you would comment, as you tanked up with drinking water from the outside tap, "This water's gettin' darker, ain't it?"; and she would scratch under that moth-eaten robe of hers, rub the moles beside her ear, and say with a broad smile, "Just got a bit of sulfur, and that'll keep the 'skeeters off, won't it?" It was our last outpost on the edge of civilization.

Ida acted as the provisioner for our six-packs, gas to fill our boat cans, and yet more bug dope, and we stored our air boats along the shore there. You couldn't drive to her place by car, of course, around there you used the watersheds as roads, and so I employed a banged-up aluminum boat I'd inherited with the house from my uncle. I dressed in Louis' old leather jacket, and usually got there early along with our best tracker, Big Jake Lagrene. The two of us sat and watched the others arrive, our hands stuffed deep in our coat pockets, the twilight reds and oranges streaking on the soft underbellies of thunderheads and reflecting beyond the dock, coating the black water with a sheen of blood.

We traded horror stories from our war experience, real nightmare stuff. And I surprised Jake; I knew my share. Jake also loved guessing games, attempts to speculate about whether so-and-so would be able to dock themselves half-sloshed in their hangover, or if certain of our married partners would escape the clutches of their "Dragon Ladies." We'd bet to see if Pops, who hated mechanical repairs, preferring to fix his troubles with blows from a hammer, could nurse his Evinrude to Ida's one more time. Or if he'd break down and get lost, necessitating a search party before we motored west into the deeper reaches of the Athchafalaya swamps, where the poaching was best. Since I showed regularly, and Jake favored me, I was

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allowed along despite Pops' paranoia and petty fears. The men posted me on the trailing motor barge, affectionately deemed "the corpse bucket."

That fateful night, however, they needed a steady hand on one of the spotlights, so I rode in the lead airboat on a torn swivel seat bolted like a gun turret into the nose. When I heard a thump-and-wallop in the rushes, I flicked on the battery and nailed the 'gator within the beam. Or if we were lucky enough to spot a muddog, I danced the light around the thing, dazzled it until it froze straight up like a popsicle. The two air boats paddled close with the spots fixed ahead. Someone, most likely Pops or Big Jake, would ready a prod. When we'd drifted along the current within reach of the Snapper's elongated arms, Pop would whack it aside the head and the charge would make jelly out of its brains. Or whatever the damned things had upstairs. If the muddog bolted, the gunners wasted a few rounds of ammo from the M-16s, and wasted was the word. The things were fast, armored like a tank, and possessed, as my Uncle Louis once explained, a temperament little suited for an attack or a fight, even when cornered.

Muddogs are always gonna run. Never did want this world.

Despite my growing skill with the spot, our sortie was well below quota by the time a yellow moon swelled big as a tumor above the dense canopy of the swamps. Jake looked pensive as he stood beside me at the bow and nodded at the shadows shifting about us, as if answering an invisible questioner. The men grumbled about their share, saying that three weren't enough hides or muddog shells to pay costs, especially the bribes to a certain son-of-a-bitch game warden whose influence extended over the swamp and the adjacent muddog preserve, a warden they'd likely see before the evening was out. The boys talked ugly as they gaffed their boats together in a narrow strip of open water.

"Maybe Willy's scarin' off the doggies. The bastard."

"Yeah, it's hard enough surprisin' one without him."

Jake wouldn't put up with such talk. "Hold onto your hoses, boys. You're whizzin' sideways. I've been watching the banks, lookin' for the wakes where they pass. There just aren't many muddogs out tonight."

The men listened to Jake. He'd tracked enemy guerrillas through dense cloud forests as well as lowland delta country, and he could pluck an eighty pound muddog one-handed from the shallows under the boat, from where no one else saw it. He'd raise it up by the haunches in his iron grip, its razor-edged

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beak clacking away and the moon gleaming on its twenty eyes like a madness. Truth was, Jake had been born with night camouflage, and he wore a ragged black cloak to match his skin instead of their customary fatigues. His only bright marking was a scar that had healed bad and puckered out the pink underskin under his right ear. His wild hair hung in heavy dreadlocks. It was rumored that he'd majored as a herpetologist at my recent alma mater of LSU, and more than once I'd heard them whisper that Jake had a juju pouch around his neck and a sly way with the women; in short, seven foot of modern voodoo man.

"What's spookin' em?" Pops asked Jake.

"Can't put my finger on it, but there's signs."

Jake pointed toward a thick dome of growth that formed the border of a neighboring swamp to the south.

"What signs?" they asked him with expectant stares.

"That they're gatherin' outside the regular haunts. In Bayou Lacombe."

Bayou Lacombe. That place give ya the chills, kid. Yer Uncle Louis gonna take you there.

"So, let's motor in," I said after a long silence.

"Ain't so easy, Peter-eater," said Pops. "This ain't a night for trouble."

I countered, "Who said anything about trouble?"

"Lacombe's where bad things happen. And if I wanted in, I'd sure as shit not bring yer ass along. Be doublin' the bad luck."

That raised my hackles. "But I know Lacombe. I went there with..."

"Yeah, ol' Louis. And you ain't him, just like you..."

Big Jake interrupted. "I also know Lacombe, know it well. If you're not in on this, Pops, I'll take those who are. Fewer guys splittin' the cash the way I see it. And we won't have a warden to mess with, neither. Lacombe is outside of the federal preserve."

A round of thumbs-up won out over Pops' complaints, and Pops manned the push poles with the rest of us, brooding but not vocal about his anger toward Jake and myself. I tried to ignore him, to rise above the moment. The beauty of the swamplands always served to strip away the crude vestments of my humanity: those necessities of talking neo-Neanderthal, or of wearing old Army clothes, or the bad memories of...of...of everything I'd done and seen. Thus, the bayou brought out a mellow eloquence in my soul.

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Louis Nevelle Parti had kept an order to the chaos of his life. We had lived in an old Savannah-style house along the edge of the Athchafalaya, a decaying building that gathered every bit of flotsam Louis ever found on those waterways, yet if he needed something, he knew exactly what room, what spidery closet I could find it in. My uncle also kept his thoughts uncluttered. He told stories, told them well, but they rarely stretched the truth far. Louis had a favorite that he never quite pieced together before he died. It is my favorite as well.

"Before ya came into the world, I rescued a Northerner named McColley and a baby from Lacombe Island. Imagine that, eh? The greenhorn had gotten that far in, sheared his prop and run ashore. Found the baby, he said. That's strange enough, but the baby weren't right. Ya should have seen its eyes. Glowed a cold blue-like fire in the moonlight. Glowed!"

Louis always looked away for a moment. Scratched his beard.

"The swamp is fickle. Ya can't trust it. I left them in East Caillou, and never heard a word after. 'Cept twenty years later, when ya was about twelve or so, back here asleep, a young man found me in the Cooter Café and wanted a one-way ride to guess where? Well his name was McColley, too. I never saw him again, either, after I left him out there, but I heard Pops Boudreau say he ferried a man outta that area about then. Can't trust Pops, though. Always wished I knew the whole story. Bayou Lacombe. That place give ya the chills, kid. Yer Uncle Louis gonna take you there someday."

Louis would smile at this point and give me a wink.

"But ya know. I never let on to that young man that I figured who he was. And I did figure it."

I always fancy that the poet within me comes from living with that old man. In that way, I lend the bayou romance.

Tall cypress trees and tupelo gums dominated the narrow runs that connected the main swamplands with Bayou Lacombe. They made tunnels with water no deeper than potholes under our boats. Their wide buttresses jutted above the ebony surface of the swamp, and scarlet tongues of trumpet flowers hung from connecting vines. An impenetrable tangle of smilax shoots and buttonbush umbrals grew right to the water line, surrounded by lacy butterflies and bees that worked through the hot languid nights. Gray streamers of moss switched like lazy horse tails in the breeze. Branches

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swayed; the growth seemed to muffle the night sounds: a fart of methane rising through the muck to my right, katydids sawing above, rasp-throated toads all around, the distant hoot of a barred owl far ahead. I felt an enchantment envelop us as we poled in.

Lacombe was not a true bayou, but a self-contained, sometimes accessible swamp whose peat base and great mass of decaying vegetation turned the water into an acidic tea. The muddogs usually did not favor this environment, where the competition with alligators became heated. Several men, Pops at the head, questioned whether the creatures would be there at all, until their piercing otherworldly cries became frequent enough to jangle our nerves. We started our engines and motored slowly into this forgotten heart of the Athchafalaya swamp. Pops snapped his scrawny knuckles in succession and chewed at a wad of tobacco in the pocket of his cheek. He spit that juice in a brown stream into the spray from the boat. His agitation grew when we cut our engines and drifted.

"Where are they?"

Jake bent at the gunwales, as if sniffing the water. "They're here, but I can't see a wake."

"Then where?" I asked.

A snag caught Jake before he could answer, a thick branch poking up from the decaying vegetation surrounding us. It tugged his hair and pulled his head down. With a jerk, Jake tumbled forward and fell toward the water before I could stretch and catch ahold of him. A cry ended with a flat splash, then chilled silence. Adrenaline shot into my system like a jolt of grain alcohol. I heard myself say, "Jesus H. Christ." Another branch-like arm, followed by a beartrap set of muddog jaws, grabbed at one of the guys hanging over the side. All hell broke loose in a hand basket.

"They're attackin'," someone cried. "Muddogs!"

William, there's a truth about muddogs. Eh? Mean as they look, they don't never hurt nothin'. Not many a creature in this universe is meeker than they. If the shitstorm happens, it'll be them that inherits the Earth.

Most of the men piled from the vulnerable air boats onto the solid platform of the barge, and I would have as well, if I hadn't been knocked down by someone in the rush. My head hit the metal rim of the boat in a flood of pain, and by the time I'd raised myself to my feet, the boat was adrift from the rest, spinning in the eddies, its lone flood beam switched on and probing up

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and down like a scythe through the dark undergrowth along the shore. The other air boats formed a brilliant yet unreachable constellation of lights behind me. I groped in the dark for the started cord on the motor. The pull handle had been sliced off, and no poles or oars were at hand. I was adrift on the current, left to my own devices, wondering what my uncle would do in this predicament.

In the bayou, kid, yer at its mercy. Things is different in there. Ya hafta respect it. Eh!

As the boat swung its ass-end close to a cypress house, where the trees clustered and gave a semblance of solid ground, I sensed a more immediate and alarming problem, literally sensed it. Something was pulling itself into the boat by a loose mooring line. Something big, covered with moss, and, yes, sputtering. No, it was coughing. Like a man.

And it said, "Give me a hand."

I said as I pulled him in like an anchor, "Are you all right, Jake?"

A grunt and then a gritting of teeth. "My leg's hurt."

I eased him over the gunwale onto his right side, brushed away the slime and stringy plants. His face shone with intensity, as if he'd suddenly taken on the many-eyed countenance of a muddog.

"William," he said. "William, we're going with 'em."

Gunfire sputtered to our rear, muffled and unimportant. "What?"

"I said, we're followin' the creatures wherever they're headed."

He tugged in the line he'd hung onto in the water. One of the long steering poles was knotted onto it with a vine, and he now untied it and shoved it straight into the swamp bottom, using it as a crutch to lean on as well as to push us along. He pointed into the darkness.

"There's somethin' weird goin' on," I said, hearing another voice from my past. "Things are different in there."

NIGHT ON the bayou brings with it a feeling of complete isolation. The damp smells of vegetation, redolent of wood rot and leafy decay, seem to rise with the pull of the moon. The sounds of civilization rarely carry.

My uncle would sometimes sit with me in his boat and drift with the evening current. Ignoring the sting of insects. Listening to birds and reptiles. Telling me to look deeply into the shadows, to see through the darkness. It

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has always been a time for rumination for me, but though he meant this to be a lesson in cleansing, I've always searched the water's edge for the shapes of fantastic creatures. Wild men, perhaps. Or giant 'gators. Or "haints" like the Bigfoot variant named Sulfur Bottom by the locals. Balled lightning was a popular worry, as well. The phenomenon seemed to go hand in hand with UFO sightings, airborne displays and curious burned areas in the woods, but balled lightning could get down to ground level with you also, and follow you. My uncle saw it several times, most prominently on that night he rescued that man and a baby from Bayou Lacombe. In a way, this kind of storytelling allowed for the easy acceptance of muddogs when a French scientist from Houston came in and proved the existence of these creatures who'd been vexing the locals, especially my uncle, with fleeting glimpses of their strange turtle-like morphology. Were they, perhaps, mutations from all the toxins building in the Earth's waterways? Or were they natural beasts previously thought legendary beyond their limited domain? The scientist couldn't determine which. He discussed the possibilities that what caused the mutant rain forests in South America and New Guinea might also be affecting the Gulf states now. These were the inheritors of the New Earth. Right? What better place to find them than in Creole country?

I have no answers. I ponder the night. From the hidden recesses of my spirit, every beast imaginable creeps on padded feet. Oddly, none are mutations. Most have the grim faces of soldiers. And innocents. Both the victims of my war.

Jake sat on the bucket seat up front and poled with frantic strokes, working the nose of the boat into another narrow inlet clotted with knobby lilies and floating elephant ears of spadderdock. The other men were far behind, calling and cursing, and flashing their two spots through the growth. I observed to Jake that they were probably looking for us, but he growled at me and said it was best not to return to the group. Period. No argument. So, I let Jake lead the way. I was safe, and in no hurry to see Pops Boudreau, whom I now, in a haze, recalled had slugged me in the confusion and probably cut my precious motor cord as well. But there was a catch...I doubted Jake's judgment. He stopped the boat, then eased close to the shore. He inspected the muck and lily pads in the glare from our spot. I imagined many shadowy forms, but I saw nothing of interest there. Perhaps he'd chosen this moment

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to play amateur naturalist, which, considering the mad circumstances, did cross my mind. Then with an abrupt push of his pole, he ran us aground on the yellow-green banking of moss at the base of several immense cypress trees, and without a word of explanation he gestured for me to follow him onto land, if a bouncy rug of sphagnum can be considered solid enough for land. I didn't relish sinking to my thighs in this stuff, but I also didn't care to be left alone again in the boat. Jake, at least, had tied the boat to a cypress knee. He planned to come back to it.

It wasn't until I'd bushwhacked a couple yards through the understory of the cypress house, knee-walking actually, pulling myself from sapling to sapling on my shins like a fattened goose, that I realized we didn't have a flashlight to return by. We certainly didn't have a compass. I groaned in despair.

"What's wrong?" asked Jake.

"I can't see," I answered, not really stating the heart of my concern.

Jake laughed like a maniac. "Just wait. Just wait."

Believe me, though I was afire with anticipation, I could wait; I didn't have even a reasonable choice. No choice at all.

Kid, yer at its mercy.

In an entomology textbook I used at the university, there is a scantly detailed account of a rain of fishes observed by a government fisheries biologist, one A.D. Bajkov, that occurred in Marksville, in Avoyelles County, on October 23, 1947. Through Uncle Louis, I know the details.

While Bajkov ate breakfast at a local greasy spoon, a troubled sky dumped several species on a couple thousand yards of private lawn and the courthouse square, the most conspicuous preserved being a large-mouth bass of some nine inches in length. Now, there were no reports of flash cloudbursts or waterspouts touching down along the Gulf Coast, and though small tornadoes were in abundance in western Louisiana, the locals knew little about this at the time. They saw sunlight and broken clouds. They talked of God's miracles or the Devil's work, depending on the acidity of their nature, and the event became myth — embellished into dockside yarns of men knocked flat by lunker catfish, or women gathering enough manna to gut and freeze for a winter, or of a boy who spoke with A Fish That Walked and became purified of all evil. Marksville was put on the map.

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I use the case to illustrate that local myths often have their roots in true events. Remember this.

As Jake led us into the lightless depths of the cypress dome, it became brighter. I know this sounds wrong; it certainly felt wrong. But the greenish light of *Clitocybe illudens*, or jack-o'-lanterns as Uncle Louis taught me, glowed where many mushrooms clustered, and bioluminous foxfire molds coated everything. Displays like this were usually small and spread apart, but here fungi grew to thick carpets about us, and when I commented on the irregularity of such formations, Jake nodded.

"I kinda thought a naturalist like you would freak at this, that's why I arranged it for you to come along."

"Arranged it?"

"Sure. By startin' the commotion on the boats."

"But Jake, the muddogs..."

"They'd never attack. I dived in and lifted one out of the water to scare you all. Sure effective, eh?"

"Yeah, Jake. You could have warned me, you know."

"Didn't have time. When I realized what was happenin', I had to act."

"What is happening then?"

"They're queuin' up. Gettin' ready."

I stopped beside a huge clitocybe, and Jake decided to rest as well. Knee-walking relieved the pressure on his painful leg and ankle, but not all of the pressure...the method was tiring.

"Okay," I said. "Want to explain?"

A smile cracked his face, and the pale glow about us frosted his dreadlocks and reflected off the surface of his eyes.

"Say, how about this, William? A new species shows up. It's elusive, dies in captivity, though apparently smart. It multiplies, but fails to expand its territory. I mean with all the damn supernatural stories around, you'd think they'd do best to hide from us. But then things start disappearin'. Odd things. And you're the only one noticin' the connections. You begin to study these critters, and you're gettin' attuned. What would you do? Start tryin' to explain what's goin' on? Who'd believe? Who, my boy, would goddamn believe me?"

I was sinking in the sphagnum, with water up to my waist. I started

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moving again in an awkward crawl.

"You mean they're up to something strange?"

"Use your head, Willy. Louis would've guessed by now."

In the swamps you have to expect the unexpected. *The swamp is fickle,* Louis said to me. A seductive bitch. Here is another of his stories.

Around 1890, the state of Georgia offered the famous Okefenokee for sale at less than thirty cents an acre. The Suwanee Canal Company pictured a cut running from the great swamp east to a river that meandered to the Atlantic along the border between Georgia and Florida. They foresaw that the waters would empty through this canal. They saw the draining of the great swamp, saw dollar signs when estimating the forest's board footage and the rich-soiled farm lands they had bought. They were myopic. They should have listened to the old-timers who said the swamp was capricious and mercurial as a woman, that you couldn't trust the damn place.

After five years of dredging and scooping a passage forty feet deep and a dozen miles long, they reached an area where the miracle was to begin. The water should have pushed toward the St. Mary's River, urgent for release into the Cumberland Sound. Should have...but someone had forgotten to compare elevations, perhaps. Forgotten a fundamental law of physics. Instead, the river water started to backflow into the Okefenokee.

I consider this a flip-flop case where a true event had its roots in local myths. A flip-flop, also, is something you must expect here.

WE REACHED firmer ground, and Jake broke off a dying sapling to use as a crutch. We moved unexpectedly into a clearing, though a further increase in light had been evident as we approached. I knew at once that this was the spot where my uncle had rescued the man and the strange child long ago. Greenish bioluminescence sheathed all vegetation to the height of our heads, and above that the tree trunks took on an ashen pallor as they dwindled to graceful fingers that reached for the sky and the moon beyond. Angled slashes formed a herringbone pattern at their bases, as if they'd been tapped for rubber sap, while the saplings and brush were pruned so that the sebaceous moonlight knifed into the opening from all angles. Big sail flies with colorfully speckled wings danced in long chains, breaking up at our sudden

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movements and falling in confetti clouds. They congregated in the bright opening at the center of the clearing, where the muddogs stood about a machine — a squat construct sprouting cables and a large-lensed searchlight that cast a faint vertical beam of turquoise into the dark sky. The beam shimmered with dust and the fluttering of a thousand insects.

The muddogs — awkward out of the water — worked at bunches of cabling that snaked to a large, yet quietly humming generator. Somehow this Gothic tableau made sense: the glowing life, the strange beam that hastened, perhaps, its proliferation, and the muddogs standing at the core of the mystery. The apprehension that had at first welled in my chest now dissipated with the sheer beauty of what I saw.

"My god," Jake said in a slow leak of breath. I stood speechless.

Kid, yer at its mercy.

Jake continued forward, and the muddogs turned to him and shifted ranks sideways, disturbed like scurrying beetles. Only they didn't move back, they stood their ground.

"Jake..." He heard little or nothing of my concern.

With deliberate strides he hobbled to the beam and put his hand within its dull light. Tongues of blue lightning licked along it, and he jerked it back, as if stung by angry wasps. He tried it again, with the same painful results.

"I want cleansing," he shouted. "Take me."

The muddogs erupted in a curious clacking noise, a drone that Jake the tracker could imitate with ease. He began to get into the rhythm of it, the consonances. He chattered loopy syllables along with the rest. They became dead silent again, and one muddog, a monster the size of a bear, sprang forward on its stubby legs, swaying above Jake, its eyes flickering with the light from the shower of brilliant motes that reflected off insect wings within the beam.

Jake kneeled, bowing to the turtle-like creature, and though it knew little, if anything, of human custom, it mimicked another human rite. Dipping its claw into the beam, it collected a wisp of seething lightning and knighted Jake with it on the head. Jake rolled on the ground in agony, pushed his dreadlocks into the puddles and moist loam, but the blue lightning could not be extinguished. It spread, engulfed his shoulders.

I stepped toward him, hoping to help, but stopped when the great muddog offered a dose of lightning in my direction. I had not sought contact as Jake did, and I believed that I had followed him here to be a witness, not

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a participant. But as Jake rolled onto his knees again, and trembled and stood, I knew I had to do something to stop this. I became incensed. I hefted a heavy branch and swung at Jake's leg. It connected on his bad ankle, and he collapsed like a stone. Out cold with pain. The lightning lost its connectivity from the muddog to Jake, and sputtered out.

The muddogs looked at me, god knows what in their expressions, if they even had expressions, and I started to babble. To see visions of the Persian Gulf War before me. My own needs burst out of me in a shower of emotions.

"Take me instead. Cleanse me of my sins."

There was no answer, yet I couldn't help myself and blubbered more.

"I did terrible things in the Gulf. I tortured innocent civilians for the Army. Once I tortured a child. A child. Please show me mercy."

The muddogs made no move toward me.

"I have always been alone. I was abandoned by my family. My uncle died, and I was alone. Please, take me!"

I swayed toward the blue light, arms outstretched, but before my hands penetrated the beam, pain exploded, piercing my head for the second time that night. I blacked out, then came to on the wet ground.

"Take me," I mumbled and raised my head.

Jake was ahead of me, clothed in lightning again, acclimated to the fire eeling over his skin and under his cloak. He swung his sapling crutch around his head, the crutch he'd knocked *me* cold with. He let loose a cry, but not from any sort of despair. Instead, it piped like the bestial triumph of a jungle cat. He stood, his arms raised, and dipped his upper body into the light.

The blue lightning crackled like hot butter in a frypan. He rocked back, and for a moment, a time separated from eternity, his body appeared to shimmer down to its core, a deep indigo that penetrated into the marrow of his bones. Then gunfire started outside the dome. Bullets ripped through the clearing, shearing away small branches and pinging off the metal casing to the search beam. The muddogs flattened, as Jake did, but a new voice yelled in anger from the shadows. The man — the second McColley, no doubt — stretched, appearing from my vantage, with my face in the muck, to swell with the light as Jake had. He sent colored rays from his fingertips. They wriggled between the trees and out to the water beyond. I heard muffled cries and explosions, then one ray returned with someone tied in its grip — Pops, of course.

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McColley toyed with the old Cajun, flipping him in the air while the man's M-16 chattered out shells until it was exhausted, then let him drop suddenly, making the anaconda coils of the blue rays twist about the man and squeeze him as if the light had true shape and substance. Apparently it had, for Pops begged for mercy.

As I raised myself like an apparition from the mud, Pops saw the muddogs and mewled like a wounded deer. McColley cast him aside into the mosses as if he were a rag doll.

Kid, yer at its mercy.

And in a crackling storm of lightning, with blue forks clashing and ripping along the shining column, McColley and Jake and a long line of muddogs dissolved.

"Take me," I said, staggering forward. "Make me whole."

No one, no thing answered.

The beam of light burned out, and smoke rose up into the moonlight like the twisty stairs of a tower that seemed more vast than the night could contain.

I tell the reporters what Louis Parti might have told them. The swamp is fickle. It will heal you in ways you can't understand; it will wound you with the truth. You can't trust a place so steeped in local myth and astounding fact. You can't trust your senses in there.

You, especially, can't trust yourself.

The swamp tricked me out of forgetfulness, out of innocence, out of sweet nepenthe and into recognition of my soldier's travesties. The swamp is a kind of mirror. My uncle taught me this, not so much by implicit instruction as by illustration. He could have tried to protect me from the world. Could have held everything up in the intensity of the sunlight, in the belief that there are ringing truths, unwavering principles, and, yes, right ways to be and live. He could have exposed just the sheer beauty of our bayous and byways, not the dark understories we must always travel through. Instead, it seems, my uncle tried to teach me night vision. To make me see beyond the dark in which I shined.

At dawn, the warden picked up my partners, the cold and weary survivors of yet another battle. Together, they found the burned out husks of strange machinery. Found Pops, incoherent and broken. Found me wandering the

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fringes of the cypress island, in about the same shape. No one realized that the muddogs were gone, and their mention was lacking to such a degree that I question whether they weren't a mere figment of my imagination, of my mind still searching out the demons in the shadows. But then, no one, not even Pops in his ranting, has mentioned Jake Lagrene either. Out of sight, literally out of mind.

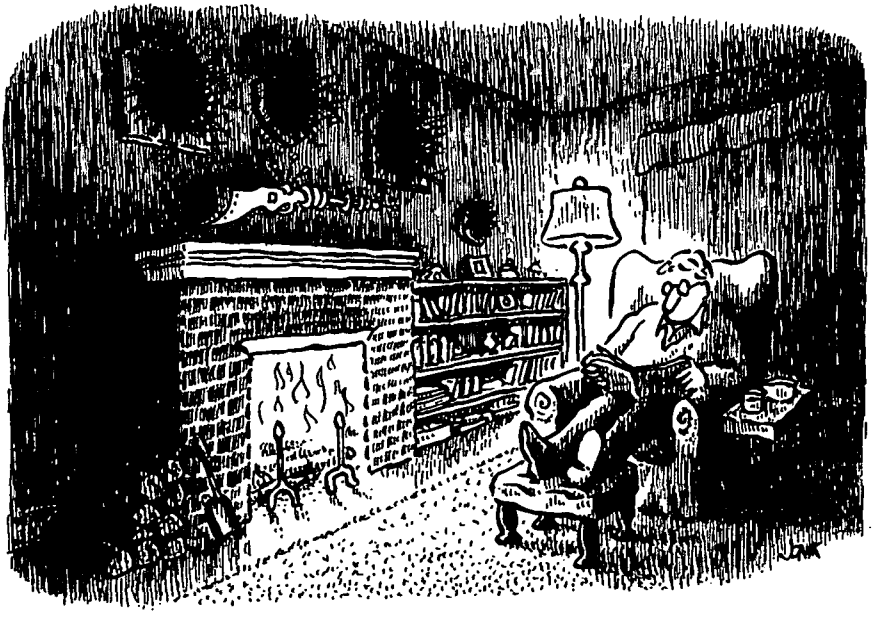
The tabloids make up fantastic stories, comparing the mystery occurrence to the Marksville rain and sightings of old Sulfur Bottom, offering suggestions of UFOs. The TV stations sniff around like blood hounds, hot for another laugh as monumental as the Suwanee Canal.

It is all denied. Denied.

Before I leave Cognizant, this is what I will tell everyone, this last thing. May it stand as my uncle's epitaph; it won't be mine:

The swamp is fickle. Yer at its mercy.

The swamp is just a mirror onto the blackest water of your soul.



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Elizabeth Hand's story, "Justice," provides the inspiration for this month's cover. She is the author of the science fantasy novels, Winterlong, Æstival Tide, *and* The Eve of Saint Nynax, *all published by Bantam Books. She lives on the coast of Maine with novelist Richard Grant and their children, and is working on a contemporary supernatural novel called* Waking the Moon.

Justice

By Elizabeth Hand

The gods always come. They will come down
from their machines, and some they will save,
others they will lift forcibly, abruptly
by the middle; and when they bring some order
they will retire. And then this one will do one thing,
that one another; and in time the others
will do their things. And we will start over again.

—C.P. Cavafy, "Intervention of the Gods"

I WAS IN A HOLIDAY INN HALFway between Joy and Sulphur, Oklahoma, when the call came about the mutilations.

"Janet? It's Pete." Peter Green, head of features at *OUR* magazine back in New York.

"What's the matter?" I said wearily. I'd just left Lyman, my photographer, back in the motel bar with a tableful of empty beer bottles and my share of the bill. I was already in bed and had almost not answered the phone. Now it was too late.

"Moira killed the Bradford story."

I snorted. "The hell she did."

Clink of ice in a glass: it was an hour later back in New York and two

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days before the weekly went to press. Pete would be at home, trying desperately to tie up all the loose ends before Moira McCain (*OUR* magazine was *her* magazine) started phoning him with the last-minute changes that had given Pete a heart attack last year, at the age of thirty-eight. "Too much fallout from the White's piece."

A month earlier I'd done a story on the mass murderer who'd rampaged through a White's Cafeteria in Dime Box, singling out women and children as targets for his AK-47. Turned out his estranged wife had tried to get a restraining order against him; she was meeting her mother at the cafeteria for lunch that day. A few weeks afterward there'd been another shooting spree. Same town, different restaurant chain, chillingly similar M.O. — girlfriend dumps guy, guy goes berserk, nine people end up dead. Now all the tabloids and networks were catching flack for over-publicizing the killings. Seven families had filed suit against a tabloid program that had presented the first killer — Jimmie Mac Lasswell, an overweight teenage boy — as a sensitive loner. Unbelievably, eight weeks later both killers were still at large. Not even sighted anywhere, which seemed impossible, given the scope of the publicity the killings had received. "Legal says put any kind of killer feature on hold till we find out how many of those suits are going to trial. That means Bradford. Moira's already called and canceled your interview."

"Son of a *bitch.*"

I'd been working on this story for six months, contacting all the principals, writing to Billy Bradford in prison. This was my third visit to Oklahoma: I was finally going to interview him face-to-face. The story was slated to run next week.

"I know, Janet. I'm sorry." And he was, too. Pete hated Moira more than any of us, and he'd helped arrange any number of my meetings with Bradford's family and attorneys. Billy Bradford was a forty-two-year-old truckdriver who had sexually abused his fourteen-year-old stepdaughter. When she'd threatened to go to her school guidance counselor with the story, he'd killed her. What made the story gruesomely irresistible, though, was the fact that Bradford was an amateur taxidermist who had then stuffed his stepdaughter and hidden her body at his Lake Murray hunting camp. **PSYCHODADDY!** the *New York Post* had called him, and everyone got a lot of mileage out of the Norman Bates connection.

But now the story was dead, and I was furious. "So what the hell am I

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supposed to do here in Bumfuck?"

A long pause. More ice rattled on Pete's end of the line. I knew something bad was coming.

"Actually, there's another story out there Moira wants you to cover."

"Oh yeah? What?" I spat. "It's too early for the high school football championships."

"It's, uh—well, it's sort of a ritual thing. A—well, shit, Janet. It's a cattle mutilation."

"A *cattle mutilation*? Are you crazy?"

"Janet, look, we've got to have something — "

"What is this, I'm being punished? I won six fucking awards last year, you tell her that! I'm not dicking around with some UFO bullshit — "

"Janet, listen to me. It's not like that, it's — " He sighed. "Look, I don't know what it is. Apparently Lyman was talking to her earlier today — this is *after* she killed the Bradford piece — and he mentioned hearing something on the radio down there about some cattle mutilations, and since you're both already out there Moira figured maybe you could get a story out of it. Lyman's got the details."

"Lyman's gonna have more than details," I snarled; but that was it. The Bradford story was dead. If Legal was worked up about it, Moira would never override their counsel. I could be in a room with Elvis Presley and the Pope and John Hinckley, and Moira would be whining with her lawyers over lunch at La Bernadine and refuse to run the story.

"Call me tomorrow. Lyman knows where this ranch is — " Lyman was from Oklahoma City, by way of a degree in Classics at Yale and a Hollywood apprenticeship — "hell, he's probably *related* to them — "

"Right. Later."

I clicked off and flopped back into bed.

Cattle mutilations. I should have switched from beer to tequila.

Lyman did know where the ranch was — a few hours outside of Gene Autry, an hour or so from the Texas border and about sixty miles from where we'd been staying.

"I'll meet you there," he said after giving me directions. Already his accent had kicked back in, and he'd resurrected a pair of ancient Tony Lama cowboy boots that he wore beneath his ninety-dollar jeans. "No later than

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noon, I swear."

He'd made plans to meet some distant cousin for a late breakfast somewhere on the way —

"Great barbecue, Janet, wish you'd join us — "

But I was too pissed to make small talk with Lyman and Don Ray. Instead I told Lyman I'd drop him off, and Don Ray would drive him down to find me in Gene Autry.

But Lyman was still determined that I salvage something from the trip. "Listen here, Janet, if you go about four miles past Sulphur you can get off the Interstate onto old Route 77. It'll take you right where we're going, and it's a real pretty road. I *know* you never got off the Interstate when you were here before. Route 77 goes through the Arbuckle Mountains and Turner Falls. And right before you hit the Interstate again there's a place called Val's Barbecue. Check it out for lunch."

He squeezed my arm and piled out of the rental car, weighted with cameras — he'd prove to the hick cousin that he was a real New York photographer now. And so I drove off, heading south for Gene Autry.

It took a while for Route 77 to get pretty. There was none of that Dustbowl ambiance I'd been expecting when I'd first come out here to meet with Bradford's wife. A lot of Oklahoma looked just like everywhere else now: McDonald's, franchised bars with stupid names, endless lots selling RVs and fancy pickup trucks. But after half an hour or so the landscape changed. The franchises dried up; the tacky ranch houses with over-watered lawns gave way to tiny dogtrot bungalows silvered with age, surrounded by rusting cars and oil wells long since run dry. Behind these stretched what remained of the great prairie — most of it given over to grazing lands now, but oddly empty of cattle or any other signs of cultivation. The sky was pale blue and dizzyingly immense above those endless green-gold plains, though on the southern horizon black clouds stretched as far as I could see, and spikes of lightning played in the distance. I fiddled with the radio till I found George Jones singing "He Stopped Loving Her Today."

"Well shit," I said out loud. Maybe cattle mutilations weren't such a bad thing after all.

After about an hour I saw my first sign for the Arbuckle Mountains. A few miles further and I passed a grimy motel, with a hand-lettered cardboard sign dangling from its neon pilasters. **NOW! *AMERICAN* OWNED**, it read.

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Another mile and I saw another sign, this one for the local football team. A crude caricature of an Indian in full headdress, his face scarlet and mouth wide open to show white pointed teeth. In one hand he held a tomahawk, in the other a scalp. The sign proclaimed **HOME OF THE SAVAGES.** I began to wish I'd waited to come with Lyman.

A few miles out of town, the road started to climb. It narrowed until it was barely wide enough to let two pickups pass, but then I'd only seen three or four cars all morning. To either side white outcroppings of stone appeared, tufted with long brittle grass. Above me the blue sky had been overtaken by the storm front moving up from the south, and spates of rain slashed across the windshield now and again. I glanced down at the map on the seat beside me and decided to get off at the next exit for the Interstate, Turner Falls or not.

Suddenly, without warning the road ahead of me twisted, one hairpin turn after another. The map fell to the floor while I cursed and slowed to a crawl. To either side sheer walls of stone rose, only six or seven feet high but enough to block out any view and much of the yellowish light. Then the last turn ended, seeming to leave me hanging in the air. The radio reception crackled and inexplicably died. I glanced in the rearview mirror to make sure there was no one behind me and eased the car to the side of the road.

I was atop a jagged hill overlooking a vista out of ancient Britain. An expanse of hills that looked as though they had been formed by huge hands crumpling the land together and then gently pulling it apart again. Some of the valleys between these hills formed nearly perfect Vs, their clefts so sharp and steep that no sun seemed to penetrate them. It was like a child's drawing of mountains, although compared to real mountains back east, these were barely tall enough to pass for hills. What made it so creepy were the stones.

There were thousands of them; thousands upon thousands. Pale gray and bleached white, like the tips of shark's teeth protruding from the earth, and arranged in perfect lines, row after row, that dipped and rose as the hills did, until they disappeared upon the horizon. Between them the long prairie grasses grew sparsely, as though sown upon grave mounds. There were no trees, no shrubs, nothing except for the grass and stones. It was impossible to imagine who could have put them there — a task so immense and mindless it seemed beyond human comprehension — but so orderly was the progression it seemed unimaginable that it could be some natural formation.

I pulled my hair back with my bandanna and got out. The wind beat

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against me, hot and damp, and I could hear the grasses whispering as they bent across the rocks. On another morning, with clear sky overhead and wildflowers nodding between the rows of limestone, it might have been an exhilarating sight. That day I found it nearly unbearable. I hurried back into the car and cranked up the a/c. Ten minutes later I was on the Interstate.

Having circumvented Lyman's directions, it took me a little longer to find the Lauren ranch. The Arbuckle Mountains disappeared as quickly as they had appeared, and soon I was back on the unbroken flatlands, with cottonwood and mesquite along the roadside beneath signs for Stuckey's and Burger King. Finally I saw signs for Gene Autry, and a few miles later turned down a rutted gravel fire road that ran past tumbledown barns and a single rusting oil well. I was relieved when I saw three pickups pulled over to the side of the road. I checked my face in the mirror, rubbing my damp palms on my jeans and combing my hair back neatly. Too late I wondered if I should have worn a skirt — out here women still dressed like *women*. Not like they did in Texas, where housewives shopping at the H.E.B. all looked like *Dallas* extras; but I'd learned to be careful about how I looked, even for a cattle mutilation.

A hundred yards from the road four men were standing around a dark form sprawled on the ground. I crawled over the barbed wire fence, glad I'd worn my own (new) cowboy boots. Overhead buzzards circled. The heavy wind carried an oppressively sweet smell. The men knotted together, talking with heads downturned beneath their Stetsons and glancing at me sideways. The fourth walked toward me.

"I'm Janet Margolis from *OUR* magazine," I said, holding out my hand. He took it gingerly, nodding. "Thank you for seeing us. My photographer should be here soon."

"Well. I'm Hank Lauren." He cleared his throat uneasily. "This's my land here, some of my men."

I followed him to where the others stood upwind of the first carcass. A few feet behind it was another, and next to that a third. As I approached the men grew silent. One lit a cigarette and tossed the match so that it dropped onto one of the dead animals. Beside me Hank Laurens' feet fell heavily on the stony ground.

I stopped to gaze at the first body, then looked up at him in surprise.

"They're not cows."

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He shook his head. "No ma'am. They're wild boars. Least I think they are. Agricultural Extension Office is checking, make sure nobody had some hogs escape the last few days."

"Javelinas," one of the other men explained. When I looked up at him he glanced away, but went on as though talking to the air. "That's a sort of wild pig we got around here. Sometimes they breed with the other kind. These're the biggest ones I ever seen." A shuffle and a murmur of agreement from the others. Hank coughed and waited while I stooped to look more closely.

It was a horrible sight, whatever it had been. An ugly thing to begin with, larger than any pig I'd ever seen, not that I'd seen many. Big enough for a man to ride on, if he could straddle its wide back. It was covered with coarse black hair, rising in a high bristly peak up its spine. Around its neck paler fur, nearly white, formed a collar. I took out my tape recorder and clicked it on.

"What'd you say this animal was called?"

"Javelina," the man answered loudly.

"Peccary," another said, stepping forward to nudge one of its stiff forelegs with his boot. "Collared peccary, that's what the Extension Office calls 'em. Down along the Mexican border they call 'em javelinas."

"Peccary," I repeated into the recorder, adding, "This is one big pig."

From the road echoed the sound of a car rattling along, and I looked back to see a big white Cadillac pull over. After a minute Lyman stumbled out, freighted with gear. He turned to shout thanks as the Cadillac roared away, then picked his way over the fence.

"Take a look at this, Lyman." I waved him over, trying not to grimace as a hot rank wave rose from the carcass at my feet. The men started talking among themselves again as Hank Lauren and Lyman shook hands. "I've never seen an animal this ugly in my life."

"Looks like someone didn't think it was ugly enough." Lyman swung out one of his cameras and started shooting. He squinted up at the sun, pewter-colored through the clouds, then back at the animal's face. "Damn, you all had one sick puppy out here, do that to a damn pig. I'm sorry, Janet," he added in a lower voice. "I shouldn't have made you come out here by yourself."

I frowned, but Lyman only turned back to his shoot. It wasn't until I crouched beside him to examine the thing's head that I saw what he meant.

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What I had thought to be the peccary's natural, if ugly, visage, was actually the result of some ghoulishly skillful work. The skin had been sliced into roseate petals around the eyes and folded back. Its ears were gone, and flies and gnats crawled in and out of the exposed white tubes that fed into its skull. Its lips were gone, too, so that the tusks and worn yellowed teeth looked enormous and raw, stained with blood and dirt-pocked.

"Jesus," I muttered. I stood, wiping the sweat from my palms, and glanced over at Lauren and his men. They said nothing, fastidiously ignoring me. I walked to the next carcass.

The other bodies were the same. "Mutilation of a ritual, probably sexual nature," I spoke into the recorder. "Damn, this is really sick — " I coughed and detailed some of the more obvious atrocities.

Hank Lauren was near enough to hear what I was saying: out of the corner of my eye I could see him nodding. I looked away, unaccustomedly embarrassed. How often did one use words like *castration, sodomy, coprophagy* when referring to a pig? Over the last few years I'd learned how to deal with such horrors when associated with women or children — you turned it into righteous outrage, and that turned into money in the pages of *OUR* magazine — but still, I'd never been there to see the bodies uncovered. The sight of those grotesque, pathetic corpses, coupled with the stench of excrement and putrefication made me feel faint. I switched off my recorder, surreptitiously covered my mouth and took a few deep breaths. I didn't want Lyman to see how this was affecting me. Then I stepped away to join Hank Laurens.

"So this happened last night?"

He shook his head. "Night before. Found them yesterday morning. Vet came out to do an autopsy said it happened that night."

"What do they think it was? Dogs?"

He snorted. "No *dog* could do that. No coyote either. Somebody with a razor — you ever see a dog do *that?*" He pointed at one of the carcasses, its violation grotesquely evident from where we stood.

"So what do they suspect?"

He shrugged but said nothing. One of the other men, the one who'd been smoking, coughed and said, "Something like this happened few weeks ago down in Ladonia. That's Texas, though."

Murmurs. "Last year there was something about it, some place in

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Colorado," another man put in. "These mutilations. Saw it on *Current Affair,*" he added, turning to his boss. "You remember I told you 'bout that?"

I nodded and looked at Hank expectantly, my thumb on the recorder button. He was staring at the buzzards wheeling patiently in the sky. "What do *you* think, Hank? I mean, anything strange going on around here — cults, stuff like that? Kids listening to weird music?" I didn't usually ask leading questions, but sometimes — with men especially — you had to keep probing before you finally hit a vein.

"Around here we don't go in for that kinder thing." It was one of the other men who answered. He'd been frowning, watching Lyman race through two rolls of film. Now the ground crackled beneath his heavy boots as he walked to join Hank and me with that slightly bowlegged gait. "Church is a big deal out here. Kids don't go in for that satanic music. Ones who do move on out."

The other men nodded. Lyman glanced over at me and winked.

"So nothing that might explain this?" My voice sounded a little desperate. I had visions of the rest of the day blown at the Agricultural Extension Office, trying vainly to come up with some kind of hook for this damn story. "No kind of revenge angle, cattle rustling, anything like that?"

"Don't nobody rustle wild hogs," Hank remarked. The others laughed.

"Well, shit," I muttered, switching off the recorder. The stench from the corpses was starting to overwhelm me. The afternoon air was warm and humid, and clouds of blowflies were erupting from swellings in the pigs' bellies and their raw faces. "Lyman— ?"

Lyman had moved out to focus on the four cattlemen, the bloated carcasses in the foreground. The smoker lit another cigarette, cupping cracked hands around a match. He looked up and said, "Hank, what about that business with your sister and Brownen?"

Hank Lauren didn't say anything, but after a moment he nodded. I tried not to look too eager, but fixed him with a quizzical look.

"Your sister?"

Hank Lauren breathed in noisily, raising his head to stare up at the sun raising a gray blister in the clouds. "Don't have a damn thing to do with this," he said.

"I just meant it's been in all the papers, Hank," the first man countered, and Hank sighed. I armed myself with the recorder again.

"Just some problems with her and her ex," he said wearily. "Locked him

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up on account he beat up on her and my nephew. But they let him out, some kind of restraining order. I testified, I heard that s.o.b. threaten t'kill her and the boy. He's a sorry bastard. Got arrested for dealing drugs, too. Well, they let him out anyway. He started calling her and now he's disappeared. Sue's about ready to leave town, she's so scared he'll come some night'n cut her throat."

"So you think this might be some kind of sick vengeance he's taking on your sister?"

He shrugged, glanced at his watch. His eyes when he raised them again were dull. "Well I sure hope not." He dug his heel into the dirt and tilted his chin toward the pickups leaning at the roadside. "You got to excuse us, but we've got a few things to take care of this afternoon."

We shook hands and Lyman took some more pictures of Lauren and his crew. I got addresses and a few telephone numbers, and promised them the article would be out within the next week or two. Lyman and I watched the trucks leave, firing one after another and spurting off in a haze of dust and gravel.

"Well," I said as we headed to the car. "That was certainly a disgusting waste of time."

Lyman shrugged his equipment from one shoulder to the other. "What was that about his brother-in-law? Sounds like your kind of thing."

I kicked up a cloud of gritty dust, grimacing as we met the barbed-wire fence again. "It's only my kind of thing if he kills his ex-wife and shows up on national news. God, this is a depressing place."

"Well, we're done now. I booked us out tomorrow at eleven. So we can head to Oklahoma City tonight and get a hotel, or wait till morning."

He threw his stuff into the car and leaned against the trunk.

"For god's sake, let's get out of here." I glanced back at the carcasses. A buzzard had landed beside one, hopping about it like an excited kid, finally pouncing on a long ribbon of flesh and tugging at it. "Ugh."

"We-ell — " Lyman eased around to the driver's seat, shading his eyes and looking wistfully into the distance.

"Oh, come on, Lyman!" I yanked my door open, exasperated. "What is it? See Rock City? Best Little Whorehouse in Gene Autry?"

"Nooo...." He started the car and we jounced down the road. "Just there's this great place for barbecue up by the Arbuckle Reservoir. Indian

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territory but not too far from here. Only thing is, it's only open for dinner. But there used to be a pretty good motel — "

I was too dispirited to argue. "Sure, sure. Whatever. You drive, you feed me, whatever you want. Just make sure this time tomorrow I'm home. Okay?"

We found a dusty little motel and checked in. I made a few phone calls about Lauren's brother-in-law. I found his ex in the phone book. She hadn't bothered to change the number, but I'd long since ceased to be surprised by what women wouldn't do to avoid an abusive s.o.b. She was polite enough but didn't want to talk to me; I left the number of the motel in case she changed her mind. Then I called the local constable. According to him, yes, George Brownen had been released; no, there wasn't anything special they could do to protect his ex-wife, and the whole thing was probably being blown way out of proportion.

"Right," I said, dropping the phone in disgust and kicking back onto the bed. These things were always blown out of proportion, the proportions usually made up of some poor woman's face slammed against the wall, or blown to pieces inside a mobile home out by the Piggly Wiggly. But the hell with it. I tried to tell myself it was just a job.

I slept for a while. When I woke I showered, played back my tape and made a few notes, then buzzed Lyman's room. Out: no doubt soaking up more local color, or tracking down another cousin. I changed into jeans and a T-shirt and headed for the motel bar.

The motel sat on a sand-colored hillside, a few miles off Route 77 and with an impressive view of the Arbuckle Mountains rolled out like sepia corduroy to the east. A rusted sign advertising some defunct waterslide clapped loudly in the parking lot. Beneath the westering sun gleamed a tiny swimming pool half-full of overchlorinated water, the chemical smell so strong it made my eyes tear. I glanced vainly around for Lyman, crossed the parking lot, and stopped.

A single other car was parked in the lot, around the corner from our room. Not a car, actually. An RV, a mid-sized late-model leviathan with fake wood trim and darkened windows, identical to a million other RVs holding up traffic from Bar Harbor to Yosemite.

Only I recognized this one. I couldn't figure out how, or from where; but I'd seen it before. I stood staring at it, wiping the sweat from my upper lip and

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wishing I'd worn my sunglasses. All I had was a vague remembrance of unease, the name and the sight of that van making me distinctly uncomfortable. I walked past it slowly, and as I approached fierce barking broke out from inside. The vehicle shimmied slightly, as a dog — make that dogs — threw themselves against the side; and *that* was familiar, too. A flicker of shadow against one of the windows, then a thump and furious snarling as they leaped against the windows again.

"Huh." I paused, listening as the dogs grew more and more frantic. From the sound of it they were big: no retirees with fluffy cockapoos here. The RV was big enough to house half-a-dozen Dobermans. And whoever owned the van wasn't putting hygiene at a premium — it smelled like the worst kind of puppy mill, with a lingering fecal odor of rotting meat and straw. Still I stood there, until finally I decided this was stupid. I probably *had* seen it before, parked at the motel in Oklahoma City, or even at the Holiday Inn. According to Lyman, the Arbuckle Mountains were supposed to be some big vacation spot. No real mystery.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that the RV was out of context, here; that wherever I'd seen it before, and heard those dogs, it hadn't been on this trip. At last I turned and went inside. The barking didn't cease until the bar door closed behind me.

THE BAR was one of those places where frigid air conditioning and near-darkness pass for atmosphere. The same Muzak piped into the motel's tiny coffeeshop echoed here, and the paltry clientele seemed to consist of motel employees getting off the three p.m. shift. I found a corner as far from the speakers as possible and sat there nursing a Pearl beer and squinting at the local paper. It was a weekly, nothing there about the animal mutilations yet, but the police blotter said that Susan Brownen, of Pauls Valley, had filed a complaint against her former husband. Seemed he'd tried to set her trailer on fire and, when that didn't work, totalled her car. George Brownen I assumed was still at large. There was also a long feature on someone celebrating her one-hundredth birthday in the Sulphur Rest Home, and a recipe for Frito Pie that used pickled okra. I finished my beer and decided to call Lyman again. Then I saw her.

She was at the bar, that's how I'd missed her before; but now she was

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turned toward me and smiling as the bartender shoved a mixed drink and a Pearl longneck in front of her. She slipped some money on the counter, took the drinks, and headed for my table.

"Janet Margolis, right?"

I nodded, frowning. "I *knew* I recognized that RV from somewhere. I'm sorry, I don't remember your name — "

She sat down, waving her hand self-deprecatingly as she slid the longneck to me. "Please! How could you? Irene Kirk — "

We shook hands and I thanked her for the beer. She pulled one leg up under her, smoothing the folds of an expensive pleated silk skirt. "We've got to stop meeting like this," she said, her eyes narrowing as she laughed and squeezed a lime into her glass. I nodded, leaning back in my chair as I sipped my beer.

Irene Kirk. I had been covering the trial of Douglas "Buddy" Grogan a year before, the story that had gotten me a Pulitzer nomination — the first ever for *OUR* magazine. It was a horrible experience, because the details of the case were horrible. Another estranged husband, this one granted visitation rights to his three-year-old son. After a year of threatening his ex-wife, then begging her to reconcile with him, one weekend when the little boy was visiting, Buddy Grogan had called her on the telephone and, as she listened and pleaded with him on the other end, shot the child. What made the whole thing almost unbearable, though, was that she had the whole thing on tape — she'd been recording her phone calls since he'd begun threatening her. And it wasn't the sort of thing you got used to hearing, even if you wrote for a tabloid that was trying to tart up its image for a more politically correct decade.

Irene Kirk had been there. She was a lawyer, the kind of feminist the newspapers always described as "ardent" rather than "militant." She lived in Chicago, but traveled all over the country doing *pro bono* work for rape crisis centers and abortion clinics and the like. She was a sort of camp follower of cases of this sort. Since the Grogan trial I'd heard of others running into her, at Congressional hearings, celebrity rape trials, shelters for the abused and homeless. But she wasn't exactly an ambulance chaser. For one thing, she obviously didn't need to work for a living. Small and delicate, with skin like white silk and inky hair pulled into a chignon, even here in the middle of nowhere she wore the kind of clothes you usually only saw on

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models in the European editions of tony women's magazines. And at the Grogan trial she spent a lot of time talking to women outside the courtroom — friends of Grogan's wife, women from local shelters; women who seemed to have stories not too different from the one I was covering, except they hadn't ended tragically — yet. Every morning she cruised around the courthouse until she found a parking space for her leviathan RV, and I'd wondered what a woman like that — with her sueded silk suits, smelling of Opium and ylang-ylang shampoo — was doing with a van full of snarling dogs. Protection, I finally decided; *I* sure wouldn't want to mess with them.

During the course of the trial we'd spoken several times, mostly to shake our heads over the shameful state of affairs between men and women these days. Eight months later we would have had more to talk about: during a routine transfer to a federal penitentiary, Buddy Grogan somehow had escaped, aided by an unknown woman. He hadn't been heard from since. But that was still a ways off. When the trial ended Irene Kirk gave me her business card, but that was right before I got mugged by a couple of innocent-looking vegan types near Tompkins Square Park and lost my Filofax.

"I was very impressed by the way you handled the White's story," she said. She took a sip of her drink and glanced up at me through slitted black eyes. "It's amazing, isn't it, the way we just keep on going? One thing after another, and still we just can't quit."

I winced, tried to hide my expression behind my beer bottle. I remembered now why I'd been unhappy to see that van outside — Kirk's outspoken but somehow coy insistence that "we" were in this together; that together we formed some heroic bulwark for the victims we exploited, I with my articles, she in some subtler way I couldn't quite get a handle on. "It's my job," I said dryly. "I *can't* quit. Baby needs shoes, you know." I have my reasons for what I do — everybody does — but I'd be damned if I'd share them with Irene Kirk.

"Oh, I didn't mean you and me *individually.*" Kirk's cultivated voice was soft, but her eyes glittered in the dimness. "I mean all of us. Women. These terrible things happen but we just keep going on. We just keep fighting."

That last mouthful of beer turned sour in my mouth. I grimaced and looked around the room, as though seeking someone in the empty corners. "Yeah, well."

I thought of the photos I'd seen from the White's massacre: a mother

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hunched over the crumpled body of her daughter, a grandmother hugging a tiny limp figure, her face so raw with grief it no longer looked human. *Those* women sure hadn't been fighting. And then unbidden the images from that afternoon rose up in front of me: the bloated blackened carcasses slung out on the gravel, their eyes swollen with larvae and dust. When I looked up again Irene Kirk was still staring at me with those intent black eyes, her expression somewhere between concern and disdain. I suddenly wanted to leave.

"Well, it's all in the capable hands of the State of Oklahoma now." I tried to keep my voice light. "So I guess we just have to keep believing that justice will be done."

"Justice." She laughed, a small hard sound like pebbles clattering in a bowl, and leaned forward to stare into her half-empty glass. "The famous feminist reporter for *OUR* magazine still believes in justice."

The disdain in her voice was my cue to leave. I slid my chair back from the table and rose, giving her a blank smile. "I've got to go meet my photographer. Thanks again for the beer."

"I'll go with you." A slithering sound as the long folds of her skirt slipped down her legs. I shrugged, the smile frozen on my face, and headed for the door.

Outside the sun was dipping below the flattened edge of the prairie. The sawtoothed ridge of the Arbuckle Mountains cut a violet line against the bright sky. When I looked across the lot at Lyman's room I was relieved to see that the curtains had been drawn against the sunset.

"Well," I said again with forced cheerfulness — feeling ungrateful, somehow, and guilty for feeling so. "Nice seeing you again."

"Why are you here?"

The way she said it put an accusatory spin on the question, but when I looked at her she only smiled, her steps slowing as we approached her RV. For some reason I felt like lying. Instead I shrugged and said, "I was covering the Bradford case. But they pulled the story, so we're going back tomorrow."

"Mmm."

I turned to squint at the sun, then glanced back at her. She had an absent, almost dreamy look on her face, as though the name *Bradford* made her think of distant places — white beaches veined with blue water, an empty shoal beneath a midsummer sky. My earlier disgust returned. I whirled around,

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walking backwards across the empty lot, and called, "Have a good trip — thanks again for the drink — "

She raised a hand to me, her slight figure unnaturally black against the molten sunset. After a moment she turned and headed toward her van. As she approached it I heard again the frantic barking of the dogs inside. Then I was rapping on Lyman's door, falling inside with absurd relief as it swung open and the cool air flowed over my face.

LYMAN'S BARBECUE joint turned out to be small and crowded, run by a small woman named Vera who didn't crack a smile at Lyman's praise and left a handful of mint-scented toothpicks beside our plates when she dropped the check. But the barbecue was good, lean and dry and smoky, with a vinegary sauce on the side — Texas-style barbecue, not the sweet soppy mess you get in New York. I asked him about the strange stones I'd seen along the old road.

"Dragon's teeth," he said. He lifted another piece of barbecue on his fork and eyed it dreamily. "That's what they call 'em out here. They're famous, geologically speaking. Arbuckle Mountains are one of the oldest places in the world, after the Black Hills and Olduvai Gorge."

I took a pull of my beer. "Dragon's teeth?"

"Sure. You know — Cadmus sowing dragon's teeth and an army springing up. It's in Aeschylus."

I snorted. "Lyman, you're the only person in this whole damn state ever even heard of Aeschylus."

After we ate he tried to talk me into going to some dive for a beer, but I was exhausted and too aware that the next day I'd be struggling to come up with some kind of story out of a few dead pigs.

"I'll put in for an eight o'clock wakeup call," he said as we stretched and yawned in the darkened parking lot. Overhead the day's clouds had blown on. There was a thin brittle moon and a few brilliant stars that made it seem like the air should be cool and brisk, instead of heavy and smelling of dust.

"Make it seven-thirty. I want to get out of here."

I saluted him and headed for my room, stopped after a few steps to look across the lot. Two other cars were parked beneath the yellow streetlights. I could hear a television shrieking from inside one of the rooms near mine.

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And Irene Kirk's RV was gone. I walked slowly past where it had been parked earlier and went inside.

It was a while before I could fall asleep. I felt like the whole day had been wasted; like months had been wasted, chasing another grim story and then having to bail out at the last minute. I knew it was absurd, that my coverage of the Bradford case was nothing more than another cheap tabloid hustling to cash in on misery in the Dust Belt. All my pieces were like that, but the process of writing them up and then seeing them in print somehow defused the stories of some of their horror, for me at least. It was like sticking around till the end of some particularly gruesome movie to read every line of the credits, reassuring myself that it was all nothing more than a string of sophisticated special effects and calculated screenwriting. Only with Bradford, of course, there were no credits; at least not until the TV movie appeared.

I finally dozed off, the distant grumble of trucks on the Interstate a comforting background roar. I was dreaming about pigs, pork barbecue and beer, when the phone rang for my wakeup call.

"Mrs. Margolis?" A woman's twangy voice, like something you'd hear on a Bible call-in show. I groaned, feeling like I'd only been asleep for a few minutes, and rolled over, fumbling on the night table for my alarm clock. "Mrs. Margolis, is that you?"

I started to snap that I was *Mrs.* Nobody when the woman went on, "This is Sue Brownen. You called me today, n'I, I — "

I sat bolt upright, the clock in my hand. I *had* only been asleep for a few minutes. "Yes!" I said, a little breathlessly. I knocked aside a water glass, looking for my tape recorder, a notebook, anything. "Sue, of course, right. What's going on?"

"George — my husband, George — well, he called me tonight." In the background I could hear a child crying, another woman's comforting voice. "He says I don't meet him at Jojo's he's coming after me."

She stopped, her voice thick. I found a pen, scribbled *Jojo's* on the back of my hand. "You've called the police, right?" I was on my feet now, grabbing my jeans and crumpled T-shirt from the chair where I'd slung them. "And you're not alone, you're not at home, are you? You're not someplace he can find you?"

"No'm, I'm at — " The voice in the background suddenly rang out

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shrilly, and Sue Brownen choked, "I'm somewhere safe. But I just thought — well, I been thinking about it, I thought maybe you could write this up, you said maybe you could pay me — "

I got an address, a post office box in Pauls Valley. She wouldn't tell me where she was now, but I made her promise to call me early in the morning, before I checked out. When I hung up I was already dressed.

It was crazy, getting all hyped up over some routine wife-beating case; but I needed some damn angle for that story. It was after eleven. I had no idea what time the bars closed here, but I figured on a weeknight I was probably pushing the limit at midnight. Outside I paused at Lyman's door. His room was dark, the shades still drawn. I thought of waking him up, but then Lyman hated going on any kind of location shoot where he might run into trouble. Although the odds were I'd end up cruising some dead bar with nothing to show for it but an interrupted night's sleep. I stopped at the motel desk, got directions to Jojo's, and left.

Returning from the Lauren Ranch we'd passed several small buildings at the edge of town. One right next to the other, each long and narrow beneath its corrugated tin roof. Names were painted on their fronts — BLACK CAT, ACAPULCO, JOJOS — but only the last was open. A number of pickups were parked in front, more of a clientele than I thought the tiny place could hold. When I drove past I saw men gathered before the crooked screened entry. Not the sort of men I'd want to tangle with alone; not the sort of place most women would go into, with or without an escort. I turned the car around in front of a boarded-up Sinclair station and made another pass, this time pulling into the lot of the shuttered roadhouse next door. I parked in front of the crude drawing of a black cat, shut off the motor and waited.

There wasn't a lot of traffic in and out of Jojo's. The small group remained in front of the door, maybe because there wasn't room inside; but after about ten minutes two uniformed men came out. The rest of the little crowd parted, shuffling and adjusting their gimme caps as they passed, calling out greetings and laughing. The two cops crossed the crowded lot to another pickup, this one silvery blue and with a light on top, and leaned against it for a few more minutes, laughing and smoking cigarettes. Finally they slung their booted feet into the truck and drove off, the men by the door raising chins or hands in muted farewell.

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So that was the local justice department. I sat in the car another five minutes, barely resisting the urge to lock myself in. I lived on the Lower East Side, I saw worse than this buying the *New York Times* every morning; but still my heart was pounding. *Stupid, Janet, stupid,* I kept thinking; I should have brought Lyman. But at last I got out and walked over to Jojo's.

No one said a word as I passed. One guy tipped the bill of his cap, and that was it. Inside was dim, lit by red bulbs the color of whorish lipstick. Smoke curled above the floor and a sound system blared a song I hated. It was crowded; I saw two women in booths toward the back, but their appearance didn't reassure me any. Behind the painted plywood bar a tall dark-skinned man yanked beers from a styrofoam cooler and slid them to his customers. The men moved aside as I approached, watching me coldly.

"I'm looking for George Brownen," I said. I pushed a ten dollar bill across the sticky counter. "He been here yet?"

The man looked suspiciously at the bill, finally set a Miller bottle atop it and pulled it toward him. "He's gone," he said shortly. He kept his eye on the bill but still didn't touch it.

"How long ago?"

The bartender turned pointedly to serve another customer. I waited, trying not to lose my temper or my nerve. Still he ignored me, finally crouching to attend to some business behind the plywood counter. A few more minutes passed.

"Sheriff lookin' for him too," a voice announced beside me. I looked up to see a weathered man in a faded Harley T-shirt. He lit a cigarette, holding the pack out to me and then sticking it back in his pocket. He raised his chin to indicate the bartender. "He ain't gonna tell you nothin'."

Another man poked his head over the first's, staring at me appraisingly. "Brownen just left with another gal, young lady. But maybe I can help you."

I smiled tightly, shaking my head, and looked back for the bartender.

"Yessir, he sure did. 'Nother yankee," the first man was saying. "Hey Jo, you bringin' in tourists these days?"

Scattered laughter. The bartender stood and looked at me with dangerous red eyes. I nodded once, turned and fled.

The crowd at the door let me pass again, though this time their voices followed me as I walked back to my car. I did my best not to run; once inside

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I hit the autolock and sat for a moment trying to compose myself. After a minute or two the faces in front of the roadhouse had all turned away.

Still, I didn't want to sit there, and I sure didn't want anyone to follow me. When I started the car I drove behind the Black Cat, hoping to find a way out; and that was where I saw them.

She had changed her clothes. Now she wore tight jeans and a red blouse, and cowboy boots — surprisingly worn-looking boots, even in the cracked circle of blue light from the single streetlamp I could see how old those boots were, a working man's boots, not some rich urban lawyer's. They were leaning against her RV, arms crossed in front of their chests, talking. Once she threw her head back and laughed, and the man looked at her, confused, before he laughed too. He was tall and good-looking, with dark hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He glanced at my car as I drove by, but Irene Kirk didn't even look up. I knew without a doubt in my mind that he was George Brownen.

Abandoned railroad tracks crisscrossed behind the roadhouses. Next to them stood a burned-out warehouse with the rusted logo RED CHIEF flapping from a pole. I shut the engine, killed the lights and sat, watching Kirk and Brownen, trying to imagine what they were saying. Was she doing some kind of research, pretending to be one of her hard-luck clients? Or did she just have a taste for rough trade? The thought made me grimace, and I slid down in my seat so there'd be no way they could see me.

Only a few more minutes passed before she slapped the front of her van and started for the door. Brownen waited, called something and pointed across the lot. I knew he was trying to get her to follow him to his truck. But Irene only laughed, slinging her slight frame up into the driver's seat and leaning over to open the other door. Brownen waited another moment, until she turned on the headlights. Then he walked slowly to the RV and climbed inside. Very faintly I could hear barking, and then that was swallowed by the van's engine and the crunch of flying gravel as the RV pulled away.

I followed them. I knew it was crazy but I felt reckless and pumped up after my visit to Jojo's. Plus there was nothing to worry about, really; there was no way they could recognize me, cruising a safe distance behind them, and back inside my car I felt invulnerable. I don't know what I was thinking — probably nothing more than some misplaced voyeurism, or maybe a hope

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that they might stop somewhere and I could see where Brownen lived.

A rusted double-wide trailer on the outskirts of this failing oil town....

That would be how I'd write it up; but they didn't go to Brownen's place. They headed north, toward the Interstate and the mountains, then turned onto a gravel road that ran parallel to the highway. I slowed until there was a good distance between us; it was easy to keep them in sight. There was no other traffic. After a few minutes we were in open country again.

They drove for a long time. I rolled down the window to catch the night wind, heavy with the smell of wild sage and the ubiquitous taint of petroleum. I didn't turn on the radio, from some faint ridiculous fear that they might somehow hear it.

Overhead the moon was setting, bright as a streetlamp. The stars looked white and surprisingly solid, like salt spilled on a black table. As I drove the land slowly began to rise around me, gentle hills at first, hiding the rolling farmlands and the dull orange glow on the horizon that marked Ardmore to the south. The air streaming through the window was warm and sweet. I was composing my article in my head, thinking how Lyman had enough grisly photos that we wouldn't need much text. Far ahead of me the RV's taillights jounced and swam, twin meteors burning across the darkness.

I don't know when I realized that we were back among the stones. On some unconscious level it must have registered — I'd been climbing steadily for a long time, the prairie somewhere in the soft darkness behind me. But suddenly I jerked upright, as though I had drifted asleep at the wheel.

I hadn't: it was just that it was a shock, to look out the window and suddenly see them like that. In the moonlight they looked more like tombstones than ever. No, not tombstones, really, but something worse, infinitely more ancient and incomprehensible: barrows, menhirs, buried ossuaries. Lyman's comment about dragon's teeth didn't seem so stupid now. I stared out the window at those meticulous rows of bleached sharp spines, and wondered if it was true, if those stones were as ancient as he'd said.

When I looked up again a moment later I thought I'd lost the RV. In front of me the cracked road twisted until it disappeared in the blackness. The van's lights were gone. I had a jolt of panic, then sighted it: it had turned off to the right and parked. It sat on a high ridge overlooking the lines of stones, its rounded bulk silhouetted against the moon on the edge of the world.

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Absurdly, I still wanted to follow them. If they'd been watching at all they must have seen the car behind them; still, I cut my lights and pulled to the side of the road to park. I was in one of those tiny deep clefts poked into the strata of limestone and scrub. No one could see me, although they might notice that my car had abruptly disappeared. I waited a long time, striving to hear something above the soft hissing of the wind in thorny brush and the staccato cries of a nightjar.

I finally got out of the car. The air felt cooler here. Something scrabbled at my feet and I looked down to see a hairy spider, nearly big as my hand, crouch in a pocket of dust. I turned and began to walk quickly up the rise.

In a few minutes I could hear voices, surprisingly close. As I reached the top of the little hill I crouched down, until I was half walking, half crawling through loose scree and underbrush. When I reached the top I kept my head down, hidden behind a patch of thorns.

I was close enough that I could have thrown a stone and hit the side of the RV. Another sheer drop separated us, a sort of drywash gully. The ridge where they were parked was a little lower than where I crouched. Between us marched three rows of stones, sharp and even as a sawblade. I heard faint music — Irene must have put the radio on — and their voices, soft, rising now and then to laughter.

They were walking around the van. Irene kicked idly at stones. The wind carried the acrid smell of cigarette smoke from where Brownen followed her. I tried to hear what they were saying, caught Irene pronouncing something that sounded like "wife" and then Brownen's laughter. I peered through the brush and saw that she was carrying something in one hand. At first I thought it was a whip, but then I saw it was a stick, something slender and pliable like a forsythia wand. When she slapped it against her thigh it made a whining sound.

That sound and the thought of a whip suddenly reminded me of the dogs. I swore under my breath, squatting back on my heels. And as though the same idea had come to her, Irene headed for the back of her van. She walked slowly, almost unthinkingly; but somehow I knew that this was calculated. She'd meant all along to let those dogs out. It was the reason she'd come here; and suddenly I was afraid.

For a moment she stood in front of the door, staring at where Brownen

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stood with his shoulders hunched, looking at his feet and smoking. Behind her the moon hung like a silver basket. The jagged hills with their lines of stones marched on, seemingly forever, the stones dead-white against the gray earth and somber sky. Still Irene Kirk waited and watched Brownen. She didn't stand there hesitantly. It was more like she was thinking, trying to make up her mind about something. Then, with one sure motion she threw the door open.

I had thought the dogs would bound out, snarling or barking. Instead at first their heads and front paws appeared. There were two of them, sniffing and whining and clawing at the air. Big dogs, not as large as mastiffs but with that same clumsy bulk, their heads looking swollen compared to the rest of them. I heard Irene's voice, soothing yet also commanding. Brownen looked up. There was no way for me to tell if he was afraid, but then he dragged on his cigarette and ground it out, shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and looked quickly from Irene to her animals.

The whining grew louder. The dogs still remained at the edge of the van, crouched like puppies afraid to make the little jump to the ground. And then I realized they *were* afraid. When Irene took a step toward them their whining grew louder and they fell over each other, trying to race back into the van; but then she raised that slender wand and called something. Her voice was clear and loud, but I had no idea what she said.

The dogs did, though. At the sound of her voice they stopped. When she repeated the command they turned and leaped from the cab, their great forms flowing to the ground like black syrup poured from a jug. Big as they were they looked scared. Even from where I crouched I could see their ribs, the swollen joints of their legs, and the silvery glint where one still wore a cruel collar around his neck. Sudden panic overcame me: what if they scented me and attacked? But running would only make it worse, so I bellied down against the coarse ground, praying the wind wouldn't turn and bring my scent to them.

And the dogs seemed to want to run. They started to race across the narrow ridge, but once again Irene shouted a command, her switch slashing through the air. As though they'd been shot the dogs dropped, burying their muzzles between their front paws like puppies. Irene turned her back to them and walked toward Brownen.

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She walked right up to him, until her hands touched his sides. He drew his arms up to hold her, but I saw how his eyes were on the dogs. Then she thrust her pelvis against his, ran her hands along his thighs and up his arms, until he looked down at her. His head dipped; moonlight sliced a gray furrow across his scalp. I could no longer make out Irene's face beneath his; and that was when she raised her hand.

The slender switch she held hung in the air for a moment. When it dropped I could hear its whistling, so that I thought he'd cry out as it struck his shoulder. But he didn't; he only looked up in surprise. He started to draw away from her, puzzled, his mouth opening to say something. He never did.

As smoothly as the dogs had poured from the back of the van, Brownen fell to his knees. For an instant I lost sight of him, thought I was looking at another of the stony cusps stretching across the hills. Then I saw him; saw what he was becoming.

A wail cut across the hillside. I thought it was Brownen at first, but it was one of the dogs. At Irene's feet a dark form writhed, man-size but the wrong shape. In her hand the switch remained, half-raised as though she might strike him again. The shape twisted, as though struggling to get up. I heard a guttural sound, a sort of grunting. My stomach contracted; I thought of running back to my car but that would mean standing, and if I stood there would be no way of pretending that I hadn't seen what had become of Brownen. In another moment it was too late, anyway.

Irene Kirk stepped back. As her shadow fell away the figure at her feet squirmed one last time, tried to rear onto his hind legs and finally rolled onto all fours. It was an animal. A pig: a boar, one of the things I'd seen that afternoon, slaughtered on the Lauren ranch. In the moonlight it looked immense and black, its grizzled collar of fur seeming to cast a sheen upon the ground beneath it. It had tusks, not large but still vicious-looking, and surprisingly dainty feet ending in small pointed hooves. There was no man where Brownen had stood a moment before; nothing but the javelina and Irene Kirk, and crouched a few yards away her two dogs.

My eyes burned. I covered my mouth with one hand, retching, somehow kept from getting sick. I heard a high-pitched sound, something screeching; when I looked up the javelina had darted across the ridge, heading toward the car.

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"Jimmie Mac! Buddy!" Irene's voice was clear and loud, almost laughing. She raised her wand, pointed at the boar scrabbling through the brush and yelled something I couldn't make out. I raised myself another inch, in time to see the two dogs burst from their crouch and take off after the javelina.

Within seconds they had it down, within the shadow of the RV. Their snarls and the peccary's screams ripped the still air. I could hear its hooves raining against the metal side of the van, the dogs' snarling giving way to frightened squeals. The sharp odor of shit came to me suddenly, and a musky smell. Then it was quiet, except for low whimpering.

I let my breath out, so loudly I was sure they'd hear me. But the dogs didn't move. They wriggled belly-down against the ground, as though trying to back away from the carcass in front of them. A few feet away Irene watched, her arms lowered now, her stick twitching against her thigh. Then she walked slowly to the animals.

The dogs groaned and whined at her approach, writhing as though chained to the wheels of the van. When she reached them her arm shot up. I thought she would strike them, but instead she brought the switch down upon the javelina's corpse. The moon glinted off the slender wand as though it were a knife; and then it seemed it *was* a knife. Because where she struck the carcass slivers of flesh spun into the air, like a full-blown rose slashed by a child's hand. Ears, lips, nose; gleaming ribbons falling around her feet like leaves. She was laughing, a sweet pure sound, while at her feet the dogs moaned and clawed their muzzles with bloody paws.

I couldn't bear any more. Before I could stop myself I was on my feet and bolting, my feet sliding through the loose scree and dust swirling up all around me. Only a few yards away was my car. I jumped over a pointed tooth of stone, thought almost that I had made it; but then I was screaming, falling beneath some great weight onto the rocky ground.

"Janet."

The weight was gone. Above me something blotted out the sky, and there was warmth and wet all around me. Then I heard kicking, and the dark shape whimpered and fell away. I threw my arm protectively across my face, groaning as I tried to sit up.

"Janet," the voice repeated. I could see her now, arms crossed, a line creasing her forehead where a scratch was drawn as though with red ink.

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"What are you doing here?" Her tone was disbelieving, but also a little amused, as though I were a disappointing student who had suddenly proved to have some faint spark of intelligence.

I said nothing, tried to back away from her. A dog lay at either side of her legs; in between I saw her boots, the worn creased leather now bloodstained and covered with a scruff of dirt. Blinking I looked up again. Her eyes were cold, but she smiled very slightly.

"I have to go now," she said. I flinched as she raised her arms, but she only yawned.

Behind her the sky had faded to the color of an oyster shell. The moon was gone and now only the stars remained, pale flecks like bits of stone chipped from the ground beneath me. In the ashen light Irene suddenly looked very old: not like an old woman but truly ancient, like a carven image, some cycladic figure risen from among the stones. I thought of Lyman talking about dragon's teeth; of an ancient Greek hero sowing an army from broken stones.

And suddenly I remembered something. An absurd image, thrown back from some movie I'd seen as a child decades before. One of those grim bright Technicolor epics where toga-clad heros fought hydras and one-eyed giants, and sweating men groaned and yelled as they strove against the oars of a trireme. A woman on a white beach, a sea like blue ink spilling behind where she stood smiling at an assembly of shipwrecked men. Then her hands swept up, one of them holding an elaborately carved wand. In front of her the sand whipped up in a shimmering wall. When it subsided the men were gone, and she was surrounded by pink grunting pigs and snarling German shepherds that were stand-ins for wolves. She raised her arms and the wolves turned upon the swine, howling. I could almost remember her name, it was almost familiar....

"Good-bye, Janet."

Irene Kirk knelt, bending over one of the dogs; and it came back to me.

Not Kirk. *Circe.*

I struggled to pronounce it, then saw how she held her switch, so tightly her fingers were white.

"Time's up, Buddy," she said softly. Her other hand grasped the dog by its collar, and I saw where something pale fluttered, a piece of tattered cloth

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wrapped around the leather. There was something printed on it; but before I could focus her hand moved, so swiftly the switch became a shining blur. The dog made a gasping sound, gave a single convulsive shake. When her hands drew back I saw where its throat had been cut, a deep black line across the folds of loose skin where blood quickly pooled over the paler knobs of trachea and bone. Frantically I pushed myself away from it, heedless of the other dog whining beside its mistress.

As quickly as she'd slashed its throat the woman stood. She took a step toward her van, then stopped. She glanced down at me, her eyes black as though hollowed in stone.

"Don't think about it too much," she said, her mouth curving slightly. Then she stooped and with one swift motion flicked the collar from the dead animal's neck. "Or — "

Her smiled widened as she finished ironically, "Think of it as *justice.*"

She tossed the collar and I shrank back as it landed almost in my lap. There was enough dawn light now that I could see that the scrap of cloth wrapped around the leather had been torn from some kind of uniform. I could make out the faint letters beneath the crust of dirt and blood.

D.L. GROGAN, it read, ***US Penitentiary 54779909***.

I watched her walk away. When she called "Jimmie Mac!" the remaining dog stumbled to its feet and followed her, its shadow humping between the lines of stone brightening in the sunrise. Then they stood at the rear of the van, the woman holding the door while the dog whined and groveled at her feet. I stood and staggered to my car, glancing over my shoulder to see if they were watching; but neither one looked back at me.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

ARTIST **Jill Bauman** provides the cover for our August issue, a rendition of **R. Garcia y Robertson's** novella, "The Siren Shoals." "The Siren Shoals" is a wonderful space opera. Erik travels through space with nine grandmothers in his head, tucked in his 360 megaRAM implant. Each old woman once ruled a star system — and each old woman is dead. But only one, Grandmother Ada, gives advice, advice that Erik too rarely takes. But when he meets up with a slaver in what he thought was an unoccupied star system, he has to rely on Ada — and his own wits — for survival.

Also in August, **Nina Kiriki Hoffman** returns with an eerie fantasy story called, "The Skeleton Key." Thirteen-year-old Tess and her friend Sasha make a pact with their favorite Greek God, Hermes. Four years later, when Tess experiences the worst terror of her life, Hermes comes to her rescue, although not in the way she expects.

F&SF favorite **Grania Davis** rounds out the issue with a wacky science fiction story, "ChronCorp." To describe it would not do the story justice, but suffice to say the tale is about time travel, paradoxes and other thought-provoking stuff.

In future issues, **Dean Whitlock** will return with a wonderful fantasy story. **R. Garcia y Robertson** and **Elizabeth Hand** will provide the inspiration for other beautiful covers, and **Walter Jon Williams** will contribute an excellent alternate history novella. **Mark Laidlaw** and **Paul DiFilippo** will collaborate on a fascinating sf story, and **Esther M. Friesner** and **Ron Goulart** will return to these pages with their off-beat senses of humor. Add **Robert Reed** and **Jack Cady** to the equation, throw in **John Kessel** and **Orson Scott Card** on books, **Bruce Sterling** and **Gregory Benford** on science as well as the feisty movie reviewers **Harlan Ellison** and **Kathi Maio**, and the magazine will be lively indeed. Subscription renewal form is on page 113. Don't miss a single issue.

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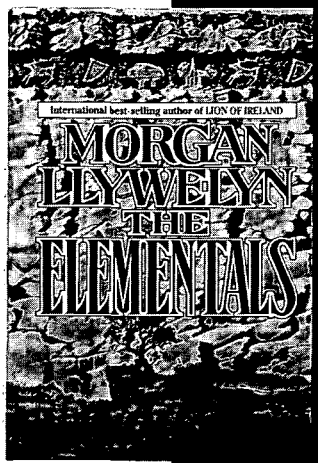

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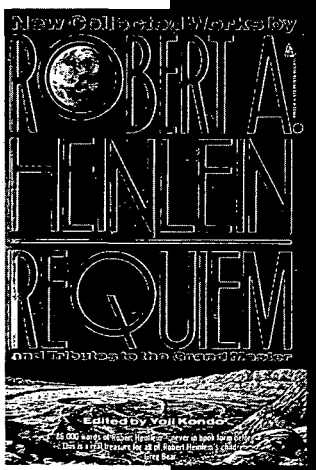

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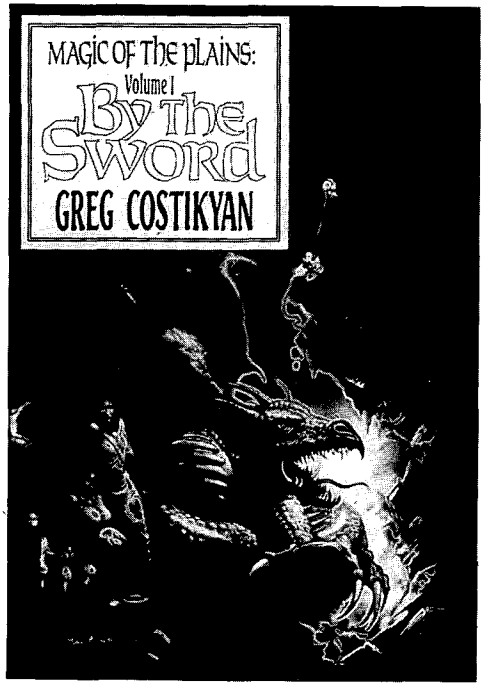

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